Extraordinary?

THE FIRST DAY

Jasmine

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By Jasmine

Book 1 out of 8

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Chapter 1

Arrival

Once upon a time…

In the fall of 2011…

There was a dark roof above an equally dark room.

The room started banging. *Tumble, tumble, tumble*, something sung.

Suddenly, things could be seen. Everything started to get into view.

"Are… we there yet?" a voice questioned.

The formerly obscure view turned clearer after a couple of flickers or so.

"No! Definitely not!" another voice replied.

To the right side of the room, there was a young boy—seemingly eight years old. The opposite of the young boy was his older brother: Bruno.

Bruno finally opened his eyes wide, stretching and yawning soon after. He took a long nap before this point. A sudden earthquake came upon the room, which shocked Bruno as much as his surroundings.

"Egh! You're right! Where are we right now anyways?" Bruno asked.

My Bruno's younger brother, named Antonio, sneaked to the front of the room. Once he reached the end, he peaked out of a hole.

It turns out that the room wasn't even a room. It was the back of a truck which held furniture for moving. Bruno and Antonio had to sit in the dreary room for over forty minutes because the truck didn't have any space left for more than two people, those people being the boys' parents. Where they were going is to a neighborhood, specifically in the universally known city that is New York City. Even more specifically Manhattan.

"I see Central Park! I think we're close!" Antonio exclaimed.

Bruno got up. Even if he was half-asleep and in his tired but normal clothes, he somehow still had energy to do anything. Even getting up. Approaching the hole, all it showed was indeed the lush green Central Park.

Bruno and his family have been to Manhattan before, but never deep inside. Central Park was one of the places they've never been to before. All Bruno knows of the park is the fact that it exists and how it loosely looks like from movies. Otherwise, he's never touched any of the grass or walked any pets. As a matter of fact, the only pets he's had are either cats, fishes, and hamsters—none of which enjoy walks in the park.

"We're supposed to be going to Upper West Side, right?" Bruno asked.

Antonio nodded, somehow knowing more about where he's going than his older brother. Upon passing away from Central Park, the brothers watch as plastic bags twirl through the air. The air itself whistling through the noise of the bustling suburbs.

Antonio smiled, maybe even holding himself from snickering a bit. Bruno noticed, as he always does. Antonio is always that sort of boy.

"What is it now, Antonio?" Bruno asked. Antonio covered his mouth with his eyes wide open.

"Nothing, I'm just excited to see some museum here!"

Bruno rolled his eyes. He knew how much Antonio loved history and politics. To him, those subjects seem boring, but not to his child brother.

At this point, it's a mystery how Bruno isn't like the rest of his family. His parents are criminally hardworking members of society while Antonio might be a politician in the future. As for Bruno? Well, it's nothing… other than maybe being an author, which anyone can be. Right?

Finally, the truck stopped. Bruno and Antonio shut their mouths dry. One of them turned back to see their furniture was doing the same. After glancing at one other, the truck's back opened up high, like a garage door. Behind it was their father, Mr. Ray, or Ryan Ray fully.

"Come on, kids. We're already here," Ryan grinned.

Antonio readily jumped out of the truck. His legs finally got away from the grip of the truck. Bruno was much more hesitant, however. He was always that way compared to his impulsive younger brother. "You know, at first, I thought we were going to Harlem," Bruno told his father.

Ryan cackled with his rough voice while Antonio took his almost forgotten backpack and ran off to his mother. In the background, multiple men took away furniture from the back lot easily. Working together does make work easier. "Oh,

Bruno! Harlem's where all the rookies and criminals and… anyone bad lives in! Here in Upper West Side, everything's normal!" Ryan retorted.

"Aren't you supposed to catch criminals?" Bruno subtly muttered. Ryan pulled off a confused parent's expression before shaking his head, ignoring whatever his son meant for the moment. "Never mind that! Just get to your mom. Your daddy has to got to do some rusty work!" Ryan scoffed.

Bruno moved his jaw before agreeing with his father and walking away, wearing his red backpack away.

Bruno's mother—Mrs. Ray, or Maria Ray—was dressed in her usual attire. A beautiful peach and orange dress. A perfect color combination for everyone's eyes, even to those blind. Bruno smirked at his mother. She smiled back. Her signature grin that'd glow up anyone's day. It was no wonder her children were so happy!

"So, kids! How is the new house?" Maria asked. She pointed at the suburban house. It looked like any other. Having a monochrome gray color palette. Triangle roofs on each second-floor window and on the main house itself. A garage to the right-hand side. And of course, a porch on the front door. The bow that binds any present: In this case, it's a house. It was perfect to Bruno's simple mind, while something else on his brother's.

"Ew! This? I thought it'd be one of those cool modern houses, not the ones this corrupted government would always build!" Antonio whined as he always does.

Bruno rolled his eyes in response to Antonio. Meanwhile, Maria thought about Antonio's sentiment. She considered it, but not fully. "Sweetie, I don't think the government build houses… They didn't build the hotel I work at, as far as I know," Maria replied nicely. Antonio didn't take it well as he should sadly. "Of course you'd know. You *work* there," Antonio hissed.

Maria and Antonio started arguing, which isn't normal for Bruno. Usually, his mother is peaceful and kind-hearted. She's never the type to start a fight. More of so a pacifist. Bruno is too. It's obvious where he inherited that personality trait from.

Upon entering the house and looking through its windows, he realized something he should've earlier back in the truck minutes ago.

"Manhattan, huh? Looks like I'm going to be some… protagonist of a movie now then…" Bruno chuckled after his realization. "Who am I kidding? I'm probably the last person in the world to be one."

Bruno twisted behind him. It was the sofa being pushed through the front door. Like any sofa would, it scratched through the wooden floor.

"Oh darn!" someone exclaimed.

Bruno then saw his father rush inside to assist in the position of it.

"Dad, can I help?" Bruno asked his old man.

"Sure thing, son! Would always love a little bit of help! Unlike any from your younger brother..," Ryan accepted.

Bruno giggled at the end of his father's added-in sentence. He went on to help with the movement of most of the furniture. Despite what anyone would've told Bruno before, he's perfectly capable of doing anything a teenager would.

After moving in, the Rays were warming up to their house—literally and figuratively. Luckily, the ACs had an issue before it was fixed by quick technicians. Otherwise, everything seemed fine.

Of course, not everyone warmed up. Ryan had an issue working in the new police department. Maria admittedly is going to have a better time of working now that she's living near her hotel instead of twenty or so minutes away from it. As for the kids: It's another can of worms to go through.

Bruno had already applied to stay in a new branch of his former school soon enough. However, unlike in his previous branch back in Brooklyn, now Antonio and Bruno share schools since this branch has all possible age sections, from kindergarten to twelfth grade, for it was a K-12 school. It could be because this branch is the first to open out of the other two.

But there is a catch to this...

While there is a wide selection of sections for this school, better than its Brooklyn and Bronx branches, the city it resides in is famous for its awful living conditions, quite rivaled with most American cities. The only benefit it has is that it has the most facilities and resources there. Otherwise, there's nothing but danger of corruption (a disease that, albeit is abundant across the world akin to the flu) and crimes present. This applies to the school as well.

Like any parent who must sign up for such a place, they booked a meeting with Mr. Dunkel, the principal of the school, about the matter.

Before that, Bruno overheard his parents talk about this while watching TV. Behind his couch that was beside the sofa, he heard so.

"Ryan, maybe we should just… move Bruno back into that school… back to Brooklyn," Maria considered.

"But Maria! The reason why we even moved here in the first place is to put Bruno into this school! It's what he wants. Plus, all the dangerous stuff is probably just bogus, and eight million people reside here!" Ryan argued back.

Maria realized and sighed. "At least Mr. Dunkel will tell us something," she mumbled to herself. "And I thought we were moving here for our jobs…" she added.

"It's that and for our son. Not only Bruno but Antonio too. He begged us since his second grade to put him into Bruno's school. Now's the perfect opportunity," Ryan replied. "If you want some reassurance, then I know Mr. Dunkel will give you that."

Bruno frowned. Knowing that he caused some sort of fight between his parents, he decided to go with them. But *how* he would ask is another story. Luckily, that story was already in his mind—just like any other one.

Bruno finally gathered up all his guts. Cleared of all his stress that he built over ten minutes of listening to his parents. Sprang out of the sofa, Bruno's feet were defying gravity when approaching his parents. Finally, after what felt like forever, he did.

Almost drowned in anxiety, Bruno asked his parents, "Mom, dad, can I come? I know I'm supposed to sleep early for tomorrow, but I really want to see my new school!"

His parents thought for a second or so. The thought of taking their son out on a school night was worrying—let alone the night before the first day of school. That influenced them to have an… undesirable response.

"Sweetie, we're sorry but, we can't exactly take you," Maria sadly denied.

"We don't want you to wake up like the bedbugs bit you tomorrow morning: which there aren't any, but what I'm saying is: Don't stay up past 9PM!" Ryan explained.

Bruno's face was of sorrow and despair once he heard the heartbreaking news. Knowing what his new school could be early isn't that big of a deal in the grand scheme of things, but in the present? It meant a lot to Bruno.

His anxiety swallowed him back when he heard the news that he had to move out and find another school away from his former two. This new one is much more

anxiety inducing to him. It's a school rumored to be haunted by students who once studied there as well. Even if there's a high chance of it being foolish lies to scare non-New Yorkers out of their city, that should still be some point of concern for his parents, shouldn't it?

Either way, Bruno had to accept that he can't go or else… well… he might commit what he promised himself not to do—which is fall asleep after bedtime.

"Now, Bruno. Go and watch your cartoons while we're busy with adult business, ok?" Ryan politely asked, without his strange, scratchy accent that is unfitting of his job's stereotypical personality.

Bruno reluctantly nodded and marched back to the couch, continuing to watch some new episodes of his favorite cartoons.

Bruno listened as his parents stepped behind him, to the garage door. The garage loudly opened. So loud that Bruno could hear every creak and crack that it produced. He wondered what they were doing during the entire two hours of the meeting. In reality, it only lasted an hour. Before his parents could return, he and his brother had to go to bed.

Upon sleeping, Bruno stared at his roof. His walls, to the left and right. The scent of wet paint invaded his nose. The darkness almost fueled him to sleep, but not just as much to cause him to fall asleep. Honking cars didn't bother him much since they only sounded like mutters through his thick window.

Bruno finally faced the window. Stars resembled faces to him. Faces smiling back. Wishing himself goodnight. He has only felt this way once. That one time he has; it was strangely when he first got to school. Perhaps he only experiences this only when he's anxious for a first day of school in a new one, but not truly.

As the moon kissed goodnight to Bruno, his thoughts bled out, all running away to nowhere. Sleep finally came up to Bruno.

The darkness got away, as the light feeling of a dream rushed to Bruno. Another day is waiting to arrive at the Earth's doorstep.

Chapter 2

Back To School

The sun shined bright in the city of New York. Clouds cleared away to make way for their smiling friend. All former lights burned out. An orange sky awoken everyone in the Ray house, except for Bruno. Bruno is known to be a deep sleeper, so it's not that much of a surprise that this is the case, even for a day such as that.

The window curtains pulled away from the window itself, revealing the sunshine flowing through the glass. It reached so far to Bruno's bed. Crazily enough, that still didn't wake Bruno up. He was that deep of a sleeper. Luckily, his mother was there to finish that job.

"Good morning, sweetie."

Bruno heard the voice but chose to ignore it to continue his slumber.

"*Good morning,*" she repeated. Bruno opened only his left eye. His right was still shut in sleeping mode.

As soon as he turned his body to his opposite side, Bruno instantly saw his mother right next to his face. Her arms were standing up straight on the bedside, supporting her calm face. Bruno was obviously caught off guard by seeing his mother first thing in the morning right in front of his face.

"Oh! *Mom…*" Bruno grumbled.

He rose from his bed. His sporty-themed orange blanket slid down from his body, revealing his comfy blue pajamas. Bruno rubbed his right eye then stretched his arms right out.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

His mother scoffed, pulling off an angered expression not long after. "To wake you up for the first day of school? Everyone has been waiting for you! Especially your brother."

After yawning, Bruno shocked himself and realized the day. It was the fifth of September: The first day of school! Without saying a word, Bruno jumped off his bed and ran right into his closet. Searching for the "perfect outfit" Bruno spotted his

usual attire. It consisted of a blue T-shirt with black stripes running across it and bluish-gray shorts. A simple wardrobe for a simple child. To cap it off: Bruno wears his future signature baseball cap, which is blue. Wearing it backwards makes him look "cooler" according to him.

Bruno gazed at himself in the mirror, somehow admiring his fashion. For him, what he was wearing was a fashion statement. Upon gazing, however, Antonio arrived behind him before Bruno could do anything else. It was obvious that Antonio (and everyone else) grew impatient of Bruno's meticulous habits and routine.

"Come on, Bruno! We don't have all day!" Antonio moaned.

"Ok, ok! Yeesh!" Bruno squeaked.

Bruno and Antonio dashed downstairs after Bruno brushed his teeth. There was no time for breakfast considering how late he woke up from his usual routine. Unlike every day, he had to eat on the bus. And all that he had to eat was a single waffle that his mother could prepare. That feared Bruno. He never stepped out of a routine—or his comfort zone for that matter. Eating on a bus was nothing he had ever experienced before. Nonetheless, he promised himself he'd eat quick before anyone could notice.

Bruno's heart pounded as he and his brother propelled themselves to the bus. They were lucky they weren't late, or else they'd be missing the first day of school! As much as that fact might make anyone anxious, Bruno wasn't. He was more concerned about his breakfast routine being ruined simply because he overslept.

Feeling like drums invaded his circulatory system, Bruno kept looking left and right for an available seat until he stumbled into one. That one had a window seat somehow unfilled. It's strange since a girl was sitting on the opposite side of it. It's as if the seat was meant for someone else. Since Bruno was in such a rush, that didn't matter much to him, so he sat there.

He scooped the waffle out of his bag and stuffed it into his mouth. Thankfully, nobody was there to watch that go on. His brother already found a seat way in the front, while the girl… The girl was seemingly in another world.

Once the single waffle was done, Bruno circled his head to look at the girl while he zipped his bag shut. He noticed that the girl was staring at the other side.

Bruno shrugged that off. He did what she did and whirled to the window. Out of the window was the magnificent view of New York City. Although the iconic

lights of the city are wiped out in the daytime, the buildings still make up a great skyline.

A slight inhale and exhale calmed down Bruno's once drumming heartbeat into a pleasant, calm heart.

Suddenly, a crash rushed to his ear behind him. He turned his head as soon as he sensed it. It was…

A boy behind the girl! The boy was the same age as Bruno—fifteen. Well, Bruno is actually fourteen, but he is turning the mentioned age soon. Either way, it can be taken as they were in the same grade. And indeed, they are meant to be.

The boy wore what most could call "a rich boy's attire." A long, puffy cape. Useless sunglasses that only exist for looking "cool" And don't forget about a golden necklace… or chain. It was obvious that the one he had to face at the current moment was going to be harsh. Bruno was jaded towards these kinds of people at this point. To this one the most specifically.

Bruno recognizes the boy the instant he sees the golden chain. It was a boy named Nathaniel. He's the son of a CEO of a corporation. It's a surprise that Nathaniel could even go to a public school such as Open Book School. Of course, it's possible that his father is such a stingy man that he'd rather send his son to some dusty eighties school rather than a high-class one.

Like anyone would when they meet someone they knew (who was or became rich), Bruno flinched. Upon discovering the identity of the boy, he was frozen silent.

"N-Nathaniel!?" Bruno exclaimed.

Nathaniel chuckled. "Wow. Do you really recognize me after so long?"

The girl between them growled quietly. "Nathaniel, get away from here," she commanded.

"Why should I, weakling girl full of…"

Nathaniel paused, searching for an adequate insult. "… Cooties!" he pointed.

The girl crossed her arms and rolled her eyes, as she always does with the boy. Bruno didn't mind her much. All he cared about was the fact that he had to deal with the "pest" once again in a new school.

"Since when did you stay here? I could've sworn you said you'd stop being in contact with the… *ghost school*," Bruno stammered along the way.

"When did I say that?" Nathaniel asked.

The girl pushed Bruno back to the window suddenly. “Don’t deal with the guy. I can deal with him,” the girl advised. Bruno gulped. His fears raised up by eighty percent. Now this seemingly innocent little girl just pushed him back to a window!

Bruno sat still over in the background while the girl death stared at Nathaniel.

“Nathaniel, do you really know that guy?” the girl asked.

“Sure do, Bloss,” Nathaniel answered, grinning.

The girl, now Bruno knowing that she’s named Blossom, clenched her fists, almost seeming like she was ready to punch someone.

“Only Aster calls me that!” Blossom yelled.

Bruno found it odd that nobody in the bus is noticing all the commotion that this fight is making. He assumed that this could be an “everyday” thing, but he’s unsure. After all, he hasn’t been to this branch of this school before.

“What are you doing here anyways? To say hi to an old pal? Well, guess what? You can’t. It doesn’t look like he wants to be with you,” Blossom answered back.

“Calm down, Blossom. Good lord, you’ve never been this… aggressive… before,” Nathaniel snarked back.

“I’m done with you. That’s why. At this point, I might have to bring all my friends into talking to you and your friend group. Especially Aster! He’ll have a word with you!” Blossom replied.

Nathaniel bit his mouth. He stared at Bruno behind Blossom. Eventually, he hissed and stormed away without a word. Only a simple “hmph!” like any spoiled child sound would make.

Bruno stared blankly as Nathaniel walked away. Only a breeze followed him. Blossom turned her head back at the shocked Bruno. She was as amused as Bruno was about the entire situation. Eventually, Blossom got herself back up to her normal self.

“Oh! Excuse me. I can get a bit carried away about Nathaniel…” Blossom excused.

Bruno froze, then shook his head. “It’s ok. Blossom, right?” he made sure. She nodded, confirming her name. “You?” she asked. “Bruno. Bruno Lively Ray,” the boy answered.

Blossom tilted her head, almost like an innocent little girl when they're confused. After, she led out a saccharine smile at Bruno, ignoring what the name might imply. "Eh! Nice name!" she complimented.

Blossom thought to herself many things as soon as Bruno said his name. She thought, "Oh my… Isn't that name familiar? Didn't Hemlock mention that? Have I seen that before during recess in fourth grade?" While she was drowning in thoughts, she was as frozen as ice to Bruno.

Seeing how Blossom was stuck on… something, Bruno wanted to say something and maybe ask what that "something" could be. Before he could ask, however, Blossom looked away to the opposite side of him—yet again. Bruno bit his tongue and did the same to her, attempting to wave through a window to light himself up.

"This school sure will be *something*. First, the rumors and now this? Maybe I *should* reconsider with mom and dad," Bruno thought to himself, believing that he can do something about which school he stays in. Obviously, he can't. No student can do that task. No parents either.

Parents have already signed contracts or have done something that consented their child into staying in the school for a year. Therefore, Bruno should at least endure the school for a single year. He already has for another back in Brooklyn… but he knew what happened last time.

Bruno ignored whatever happened in that moment by listening to music on his MP3 player. Mostly playing Stella and The Stars (a country band) songs. She has been Bruno's favorite music artist since she started back in 2004. His obsession with her goes so far as to annoy his younger brother with it.

Out of the window he's staring at, Bruno spotted multiple tall buildings with equally large billboards. He never thought he'd be in a movie setting, but here he is. Where multiple incredible movies he watched but forgot the names of took place in. Where his supposed story starts.

Chapter 3

Classmates

“You are listening to: Episode 5 of Lore and More: The Devious Tale of Utter Darkness; A figure of fear, turned to a pop-culture icon. There was once a demon. A demon so mischievous that it ruined the Earth that Mother has created. The demon spread darkness, hate and chaos. No crops were grown. No love and happiness were present. The demon enjoyed watching those under it suffer. According to religious passages, the demon was created by the god of negativity, Pain, as a way to contribute to the world other than causing pain, but mainly as a toy to mess with Mother. One day, Mother had enough of Pain’s antics with his play thing and snapped the demon out of her world. While she didn’t know for how long she could keep it away, she estimated her prison could only hold it for four thousand years. However, she had a plan on what would happen in case he did escape.

When the demon escapes, the world would be blessed with four people. Four the creator of all will have created specifically to take the demon down. Four she has placed their set destinies on. They won’t know it, but they eventually will, according to the same religious passages. People still wonder why she didn’t make the prison permanent, but the same people also wonder why Mother hasn’t solved any of her problems that caused so much anguish in her own creations. If anything, Mother was the god of negativity to those believers. Nonetheless, the prison still was a ticking timebomb, ready to explode in thousands of years.

Time passed. Humans started developing society. Nobody remembers the demon even existed anymore. For those who did, some passed their stories while others believed their stories were just that: stories. Nothing more, nothing less.

It took centuries before any sign of the demon returning appeared. The first sighting was during the industrial age. Ideas of it came around when pieces of technology keep getting broken down. It might’ve been the cause of some malfunctioning, but there were also tales of Utter Darkness possibly returning to wreck them.

As time went on, more and more sightings of the demon came out. More people started coming out with their family's stories surrounding it. The only people who really believed those stories were Americans since most sightings were in those locations.

Because of the looseness of the legends, by the 90s, everyone simply believed the story of the demon, who is by then dubbed "Utter Darkness" due to the shadow-like description of it, to be a folktale by the likes of Bigfoot. There were even cheesy horror movies created about Utter Darkness, such as "What's Behind" and "Demon of The Dark."

Nowadays, in the 2000s, every industry took advantage of the recent discovery of corruption. Even fashion and food. Unfortunately, by the time of recording this audiobook, nothing much has been discovered regarding the tale's validity in reality. Nowadays—"

The audiobook abruptly stopped as the bus did. Bruno shut down his MP3 player which was indeed playing an audiobook instead of a song. This was because the trip was so long that songs couldn't make it long enough. This should be expected for a first trip through the city.

"It really was a mistake listening to a 2005 version of the story…" Bruno sighed to himself, brooding over his poor decisions. He stared out at his new school once the door opened, hesitantly following Blossom off the bus. As soon as they got out, the girl in pink ran off somewhere, disappearing out of his eyes. Bruno was admittedly ecstatic to perhaps make a new friend in her, but it was rushed away before he could say anything. Then, Bruno thought to simply continue stalking the girl. It's not like he didn't do this to meet new friends before—he did with another girl—why would this one be different?

Bruno secretly stepped along the pavement into the school's concrete tiled floor, following the floral-dressed young lady.

Along the way, he spotted many wonders he's never seen before. Pictures on the walls showcasing the magnificent accomplishments the alumni of this school had made. This is very unlike the Brooklyn branch, and assumedly the Bronx branch as well. Indeed, the school does have a Bronx branch and formerly a Queens and Long

Island one before both had disasters brought to them. The Brooklyn and Bronx branches were elementary schools, however, and could only house students until the fifth grade.

Blossom—and Bruno—passed by those unfamiliar walls. It only took so long for Bruno to stumble into Floor 3, the floor where all the tenth graders are, where he gets to study in. Bruno paused to see his forever floor.

The floor was huge, like the others. The four grade ten classes are split up into two corners. The one on the left side of the stairs was Class 2 and 4. The other two on the right are Class 1 and 3.

In the middle was the hallway, connecting all rooms together. There were the cooking and music room, which were wide, but mostly horizontally. The rest of the floor was filled with the three classrooms for the ninth grade, strangely one class short of the tenth grade. There were also four eleventh grade classes and two for twelfth. The stairs leading to roof are featured at the end as well.

It's rumored that there are hidden classes at the end of the level. However, this was never confirmed to be true. The reason why this rumor spawned is because at the end of the other two floors, more classes are seen, whereas in the top one, there were only the ninth till twelfth graders.

Bruno had a frozen stare at the floor. Feeling daunted by the floor's air itself, Bruno tip-toed his way to Class 4, which is where Blossom was going. Little did he know that his real class was right on the other side.

Blossom, with her pink kimono dress, twirled her way to the only person in the class, though not the only person who has come. Lots have come to Class 4, it's just that everyone else went out to visit their other class friends, or more prominently, going to check their new floor structure. It's evident by how crowded the hallway was.

Blossom ignored it and just went up to the only person, which was a short boy with sharp black hair that nearly covered his eyes. He wore a royal purple shirt, covered by a black and white leather jacket. Below it are jet black jeans. His eyes were strangely dark with a purple tint to it. The shaded jacket covered him before Blossom came to see him. By then, he took it down to reveal himself to his friend.

"Morning Bloss," he groaned.

“Mornin’ to you too, Asty!” Blossom answered back.

Bruno learned by then that the boy was named Aster, or atleast started with the letters “ast” Blossom suddenly pulled out sweets (specifically peanut butter cups) and showed it off to Aster. “I brought you those Peaman’s Peanut Butter Cups! I know the others asked me to bring it, but I thought that maybe you want it the most,” said Blossom.

Bruno flinched upon hearing the words “peanut butter,” his allergies automatically make him react this way. Luckily, he isn’t deadly allergic to peanuts, simply getting a skin rash or experiencing nausea.

Bruno flinched so much that Aster noticed him at the door. How Aster reacted wasn’t like anything Bruno expected someone like Aster would react. “Hey, who are you? Are you supposed to be in Class 4?” Aster asked, getting up from his seat. It was obvious that he was getting quite… protective of his class.

Knowing that, Bruno raised his hands up as if he’s involved in criminal activity and backed away slightly from the door frame that he was leaning on. “No. I’m from Class 2…”

Bruno realized that he’s in the wrong class. He’s supposed to be in Class 2, the class on the other side of the corner! Adding onto the fact that Aster might hurt him, Bruno grew anxious. So anxious that he impulsively ran out.

Whimpers followed him. However, as soon as he did, he bumps into some other Class 4 students, who—at the unluckiest time for Bruno—are coming back to their class.

Bruno shrieked in fear as he opened his eyes and saw all the confused and angered Class 4 students. “Sorry! I’m sorry!” he constantly apologized. “Spare me!” he begged alongside that.

Aster came into Bruno’s view, upside down of him.

“It’s too late,” Aster said without any mercy on mind. Blossom watched in the background. Being a statue, she never even bothered to think to do anything about her own friend hurting another.

Before Aster was about to blow a punch, a blonde almost-redhead boy, adorning a yellow attire with black accents appears to the entrance to the corner. “Stop it right there!” the boy commanded.

The Class 4 students, who were strong in appearance earlier, swallowed themselves and invisibly walked inside of the classroom. Meanwhile, Aster stood there, squinting his eyes just to see the boy. He soon realizes who it was, but unlike his classmates, he wasn't scared one bit.

"Aye, Alex. One of your new students is here. Maybe if you came earlier, this wouldn't have happened," Aster said, straying a bit away from Bruno, allowing him to get up.

Blossom rushed in as soon as she heard the name "Alex," she gasped loudly. "Asty, what are you doing!? That's Alex; you know, president of Class 2!?" she exclaimed.

Bruno quietly exclaimed in shock. He stared at Alex, who stared back at him, knowing that he was a new student around Open Book School. Alex's stare went back to Aster and Blossom. "Correction: It's king. And you don't want to mess with a king's subjects, do you?" Alex asked.

Aster rolled his eyes, folding his arms. "Sure, you're an intimidating German. Take this nobody anyways. He just invaded my class, and I had to protect it."

"Think twice before you call me an intimidating German. If you don't, then I'll keep calling you a dwarf Asian," Alex insulted back, silently losing his grip. Aster snapped, but mentally.

Alex dismissed Aster and Blossom completely to pull Bruno back to Class 2, which was simply across Class 4.

On their way there, Bruno and Alex decided to chat a bit.

"Alex, right? Class king of Class 2?" Bruno asked.

Alex nodded along to that. "Yes. Class king. Smart of you to pick it up. What's your name. Oh wait, Nadia told me. Ah, Bruno."

Bruno startled himself upon hearing that. "Nadia? As in, Nadia Shannon? *She's* in Class 2?" Bruno asked. Alex affirmed with a nod. "Yes. She never shuts up about you since last year. She's excited that you'll be coming to this school. I bet she'll be even more excited once she learns that you're in the same class as her," Alex explained.

"Maybe *too* excited," Bruno chuckled. Alex didn't chuckle back, however. He only held a cold stare at the wall while walking. Bruno cleared his throat awkwardly in the silent air.

“So, who were those two, exactly? You know, the ones who tried to hurt me,” Bruno asked.

“Members of Team Toxic, a team for hooligans like them,” Alex briefly explained.

“I think I could tell by the name…” replied Bruno.

An awkward silence filled the air soon after. Until they reach the door of Class 2. Bruno realized that this seemingly long walk actually wasn’t that long.

Without saying a word, Alex opened the door just for him and Bruno to see the students decorating the class for the new school year. Every student does this in the beginning of every school year, both to celebrate a new “beginning” and to welcome new potential members of either the class or the school itself. It’s the latter for Bruno. Lucky for him, a lot of his former classmates are present in Class 2, so it's not like things will be scarily unfamiliar to him.

Moments after the two stepped in, a teacher dashed in. The teacher in question being the homeroom teacher of Class 2, Mrs. Berry, or Garcia Berry. She was a tall, slim, and brunette gorgeous woman.

Garcia immediately noticed Alex and Bruno, whom of which are in front of her, standing beside the wide-open door. Garcia’s long dress almost caught up on her foot when she exclaimed, “Oh my! Alex!”

“And Bruno, I presume?” she added, pausing.

Bruno smiled awkwardly and waved at her. His legs stood together. “Yeah. It’s me: Bruno… Ray...”

Garcia turned her frown to a content smile. “Lovely! Why don’t you two take a seat then?”

“But before then: Why are you so late, Bruno? Alex, I can understand; but you?” Garcia instantly questioned afterward.

“I just didn’t know where Class 2 is. Alex escorted me here,” Bruno explained.

Garcia stayed silent, then nodded, signifying that Bruno should just walk to his seat. So he did.

Garcia carried herself up. Walking back to the teacher’s desk that belongs fully to her.

As homeroom teacher of the class, she has to take attendance and ensure that all her students don’t go wandering to other classes. Maybe even to out of bounds

regions of the school. If anyone did so (again), nobody can imagine how Garcia would feel!

While Garcia searches for a book to write down her attendance remarks, the students stare at Bruno. Even if they met multiple new students the previous year, a single new one has never arrived before. Usually, when new students arrive, they come in groups, but a single one? No way!

Murmurs traveled to Bruno's ears, from to side to side. Those murmurs were about him; that's what he believes.

Bruno, feeling a bit anxious, turned his head to Alex, who was simply reading a book about a music band adventuring across the globe to save the world. While he didn't recognize it that much, Bruno knew the book because of how famous it was. To socialize a bit, Bruno proceeded to ask Alex about it, along the lines of "Is that The Hideaways Saves The World?"

Alex paused for a second before Garcia called everyone for attention. "Everyone! Please stay quiet for I'll take attendance!" she declared. "Oh, and everyone has to introduce themselves," the less caring students rolled their eyes. They do this every year, so this should really be expected.

Garcia called everyone slowly for attendance. There were twenty students. Surprisingly, everyone was present, though yet again, this is the first day of the school year. It's rare that anyone would be absent for such a day unless they're busy or ill.

While nineteen unknown, although some familiar, names were called, Bruno stared at the classroom's decoration. It's nothing too admirable. There were bullet boards that were meant to showcase works done by students. However, those same boards were just showing cheesy motivational quotes, such as "Believe in yourself," "Everyone makes mistakes, that's why pencils have erasers" and "Always remember that you are unique, just like everyone else."

The last one resonated with Bruno. He took a gander around the classroom, now viewing the strangers who were now his classmates. He realized that everyone seems so… different. As for Bruno himself? Well, he's just a boy. "But that's just surface level judgement," he kept telling himself.

Once the name calling was over, Garcia stood up from the teacher's desk and started writing something on the chalkboard. It caught everyone's attention, making their eyes point at the green board. Garcia eventually stopped. She wrote,

“BEGINNING OF THE SCHOOL YEAR INTRODUCTION!” It was self-explanatory.

Garcia put her hands together as she told the students, “Ok! Let’s start the introductions! Carly, why don’t you start first since you’re…” Garcia paused to cough sarcastically. “… My daughter.”

A girl sitting in front of Bruno’s desk stood up, went through her partner, who appeared to be wealthy, and confidently stood in front of the entire class and chalkboard. She smiled wide, almost creepily. To Bruno it was the latter.

“Hello, everyone! You may already know me, but if you don’t, I’m Carly Berry, daughter of the teacher here! Ahem, Garcia Berry,” the girl harmonized.

Carly expected everyone to clap, but it didn’t happen. The only one who clapped was her friend, her partner, who was actually next in line for introductions. Carly hissed without a word and stormed back to her seat.

The next one, Carly’s aforementioned friend, ran in next.

“I’m Sarah! Daughter of the oh so wealthy Wendy Stills!” Sarah sang. Wendy Stills is a well-known fashion critic, especially in New York.

Sadly, Wendy divorced her husband, Sarah’s father, long ago. Wendy has moved to Illinois since then. Sarah blissfully ignores all those details just to lighten up her introduction.

Those next in line were ignored by Bruno, only being white noise to his ears. However, he could hear slightly important details, mostly names.

“I’m Craig Jerry, and I’d rather say that I enjoy… mmm… maybe doing something special this year?”

“Err… Sid Nick. Nickelson? Nick.”

“You all can call me Maverick James! Yes, *the* Maverick James!”

“Mandy here. Mandy Smith. I can’t say I’m exactly human, but I think most of you would already know that!”

Eventually, it was a certain someone’s turn…

“Alex Wilson! Alex…?” Garcia called out.

Bruno woke up, somehow thinking it was him who was being called out. But instead, it was his book-intensive partner who was called. Alex dropped his book

down from his face and crossed his arms. His expression was that of a grumpy grandpa.

"You already know me teacher, and Bruno does too."

"No, I don't?" Bruno denied. Alex seemed inflamed about Bruno replying like that. His face was as red as a tomato.

"Bruno, I—" He was at a loss for words at that point and reluctantly went up to the front of the class. The boy in blue was not impressed. While he shouldn't really expect much from someone he just met, the same boy saved him from a bunch of bullies. Nonetheless, the introduction started.

"I'm Alex Wilson, son of Mr. Wilson, the swimming coach around here…" Alex sighed, almost wanting to faceplant. He instantly directed his face to Garcia, who was standing to the left side of him. "Miss, can I get back now?" he asked. Garcia shook her head no. Alex continued, looking like he wasn't bothered at all.

"I'm also the "class king," Alex stared at Bruno.

He whispered, "and it seems like Bruno's the class prince…"

"I didn't catch that?" Garcia asked. "Never mind," Alex responded. Garcia silently took the cold answer and was still shrouded in confusion.

"Oh, and I've always wanted to be a game developer. Thank you for listening," Alex concluded. He rushed back to his seat. Bruno silently glared at Alex. Alex glared back. He finally got his chance to read his book again while Bruno was called to introduce himself. Finally, the only one who actually needs an introduction.

Bruno stood in the front, awkwardly. His anxiety almost swallowed him whole until he kept seeing familiar faces. That helped him feel less… overwhelmed by the new things coming at his way.

Bruno inhaled, then exhaled.

"Good morning, everyone! I'm Bruno Ray. It's nice meeting all of you, even if I haven't said anything. I'm just a boy from Brooklyn who really just wants to meet some old friends, but I never really expected to meet any new ones! But I guess I should be," he chuckled a bit afterward. "I'm aspiring to be an author in the future, or even better, a pilot! I've always loved how planes work. Though I never think I'm going to be a policeman or detective like my dad."

Bruno was stopped by Garcia's interrupted "Wait!"

"Your father's a policeman?" Garcia asked.

Bruno nodded, confused as to why Garcia asked. “Wow! I can’t believe it! He’s really going to be important for the school, then,” Bruno stared at Garcia, almost flipping his head. Garcia smiled, subtly giving a sign that Bruno should continue.

“Well, that’s it really…” Bruno sighed, trying to ignore what his teacher just asked. The students exchanged glances at each other. Some smiled, others perplexed. “Anything you’re good at?” one asked from the back. Bruno froze. He started stuttering once answering with, “Er, I-I’m good at w-writing?”

“Anyone can do that,” a girl with a country accent answered back. Bruno scratched his head, frowning, looking down at the ground. Garcia walked to Bruno, assuring him with a pat on the back.

“It’s ok! Get back to your seat, now. That was an extraordinary introduction!” she quietly complimented. Bruno smiled back, slowly walking back to his seat.

Soon enough, everyone introduced themselves. One by one.

“Nadia Shannon! Local Lebanese girl! And one of the newbie’s old classmates.” Nadia was definitely the girl Bruno knew of from the past.

“Bella Johnson,” a girl wearing a purplish-grayish attire said while whipping her hair along to the air.

“Maximillian Lopez, but you can call me Max.”

“Renard Fox! Just your average shapeshifter here,” Bruno raised an eyebrow at the prospect of that. Though Renard isn’t going to be the only extraordinary student he’ll meet. Far from that!

“Spencer Jones. I’d rather not speak anything further than that,” Spencer sighed. “We understand,” Garcia assured, sending Spencer back to his seat. Bruno pondered in his funny mind. “What’s this guy’s deal?” Bruno slightly whispered to himself. Nadia somehow responded with “His mom is dead.” Nadia dropped the bomb so flatly, but what caught her off guard even more was just the fact that she could even hear him.

“Sheldon Ocean!”

“Riley Ferris.”

A girl wearing a violet sweater trembled in front of the class. She stuttered during her introduction. “V-Violet Violin… Eek!” she squeaked after.

“Winnie McDonald!”

“Roselynn Simmons…”

"C-Connor Daniel."

"Casper Sigurdson." As a final blow, Casper sneezed. Luckily, he covered himself before he could. "Gesundheit!" Garcia exclaimed. Casper smiled slightly at his teacher before walking back to his seat.

"Well, let's carry on with the day," Garcia declared. She wiped the board clear. As she thought the introduction would take the entire period, she didn't plan anything away from that. But to her surprise, that wasn't the reality. Instead, there were twenty minutes left from a forty-minute lesson!

Garcia swallowed her throat as she told her students, "Ok! Make yourselves comfortable here because I'm not with this new room."

"She's not wrong. This new room is…" Sheldon got cut off by Riley, who was sitting adjacent to him to the left. "Enormous!" he exclaimed. "Exactly!" Sheldon playfully replied.

Bella crossed her legs on her table while she started reading a book. Nadia scouted in front of Bella to find Bruno. Nadia's mouth was almost slobbering. So much so that in order to stop it herself, she decided to tell Bella to do her a favor.

"Hey, Bell," she poked her friend. Bella's reading was interrupted by then, bringing her attention to Nadia.

"What?" Bella asked with a bored and frustrated tone. Nadia ignored that whatsoever.

"Can we switch places for the year? It could even be for the semester," Nadia asked. Bella had a smug smile. "Sure. Because of Bruno boy, right?" she asked, pulling her book up to cover her smile. She almost strikes as scandalous in some way. "Maybe…" Nadia blushed while chuckling. Bella accepted the deal anyways and the two switched places.

After that point… Nadia would constantly just stare at Bruno's short brown hair, capped off by his blue baseball hat. Of course, Bruno didn't notice. Everything was *normal* to him. Just. Plain. *Normal*.

Chapter 4

Too Much

After the first period, which was Garcia's English class, the students got out of their classes. Why? Well, it's because it's break. After the end of every first period of every school day, there is a break in between the first and second period.

This was the tenth year's first one. They share it with the seniors, who are those above their grade.

Bruno attempted to walk in a line with his classmates. Unfortunately, that didn't work out as they all sprinted away, reckless abandon. The only one who didn't was Alex, although he didn't seem to be keen on walking in a line anyways. Out of anyone to be with, Bruno decided to stay with Alex as he always did so far. Alex didn't seem to care though. He just wanted to get the day over with.

With an awkward silence filling their air, and Bruno's discomfort attempting to swallow him, Bruno was stopped by a call. "Bruno!" someone in the distance called. Bruno rotated his back while Alex continued walking, ignoring Bruno like he was doing all along. Bruno noticed but told himself not to take it too personally. He had a bad habit in the past of doing the opposite.

Within the line of sight, Bruno spotted not one, not two, not even three, but six familiar faces! And they weren't any familiar faces either. Bruno smiled, remembering what he kept telling himself before moving to Manhattan. "Oh, Bruno! You'll get to see the guys at least!"

Indeed! It was true!

A group of six boys approached Bruno, away from the canteen. However, they weren't smiling like whenever they see Bruno. As a matter of fact, they were frowning so harshly that they could be a couple of unhappy seals who can't clap anymore. Bruno ignored that, instead clouding himself off the ignorant bliss that he always seems to arouse himself with.

"Hey, Bruno," a boy greeted, finally having a slight smile though it's not as effective as the other five smiling.

“Man! I haven’t seen any of you guys in, like, forever! It’s awesome!” Bruno celebrated. It was a miracle that his friends even decided to go the same branch as him. For all they knew, they could’ve just ditched and ran to other schools.

“Where were you anyways? I didn’t see any of you in Class 2,” he suddenly asked afterwards.

Silence came around. Bruno smiled and knocked on one of the boy’s shoulders, bringing out a snide smile.

“Ah, I see! So it’s like old times!” he chuckled. The boy pushed Bruno away from his shoulder. He sighed. “No,” denied the boy.

Bruno finally gave in and frowned like the rest of them. “Well, then, what’s wrong, eh?” Bruno asked. “You can just tell me. I’m not a fighting type, am I?”

It’s still silent. Bruno slowly grew concerned. A gulp dropped down in him. “Uh… Guys? Pasha? Toby? Maximus? Minimus? Elias? And Evan, what made you so silent suddenly?” Bruno kept asking one by one.

“Look, Bruno, the group has been in a… rocky road,” Pasha broke the news. Bruno got electrocuted by hearing the words “rocky road.” It was a true trigger for him! “R-Rocky Road?” Bruno stuttered. He knew exactly what was going to happen…… for some… reason. Bruno felt déjà vu?

One of the members snapped; it was Elias. He was the energetic and mostly annoying member of the group. However, Elias’s snapping is a change of pace and kind of scared Bruno.

“The group is *no more*!” Elias yelled.

“Oh, shush it, Eli!” Pasha yelled back.

“Sorry! We must be blunt at some point!” Elias answered back.

Pasha sighed. Elias was lucky that nothing happened to him as Pasha is the leader of the friend group… or *was* the leader.

“Look, Bruno. We know it might be abrupt for you, but it wasn’t for us,” Pasha explained. “You see, we’ve all drifted apart since you weren’t around. So, we thought, that maybe we just… aren’t really fit together… you know?” he explained further.

Bruno was left speechless. No words could exit out of his mouth. He was simply freezing. “W-We can’t break up, can we?” Bruno asked in denial—most likely to himself. “It’s going to be fine, Bruno! The students here are really nice. I

mean, Toby saw you befriending the king of Class 2!" a friend named Maximus assured. Bruno didn't believe him. "Alex? He isn't my friend. I just met him. You know me…" talked back Bruno.

"Well, there are plenty more students to befriend. We just can't work, ok?" Pasha asked. Bruno stared at Pasha, then sighed. He folded his arms, his heart wondering when it'd stop beating.

"Fine," he huffed. Bruno's friends understood that he was hurt—but they couldn't do anything about it. They've drifted apart so much that their friend group reuniting is simply out of the question.

Bruno's friends wanted to send mercy on Bruno. Unfortunately, they couldn't. All they could do at the time is just… walk away. Not saying a word to hurt Bruno even further than he already was. The most heartbroken one was Evan—the friend Bruno is the closest to.

He stayed silent to not make matters worse.

As for Bruno, he walked to the opposite side of his now former friends. Bruno suddenly felt like if he did make any new friends like his friends suggested him to, he'd do anything not to lose them. He didn't care if losing a friend is inevitable. He didn't care if losing a friend would cost anyone's livelihoods being in stake. He just wanted them to stay. Strangely enough, that feeling felt so familiar to Bruno. This whole scene is like déjà vu to him. This won't be the only time he'll experience these odd feelings, however.

Bruno approached the bathroom since he wanted to cry out his blue tears. He ignored getting food since that wasn't his focus anyways. All he wanted to do was whine to himself. If he had a journal, he'd write all those feelings on it.

As soon as he reached the cyan door, Bruno got pushed to the wall to the left by a familiar student. It was a hard push. Almost as hard as quickly pushing a door open. Then the student held his arms against the sides of Bruno's shoulders.

"Hey Bruno…" a voice called.

Bruno opened his eyes (they were closed beforehand) just to find the same short black-haired boy who wanted to punt him to the moon. He knew not to mess with the guy before—but what did he do this time? Accompanying him was Blossom, the floral kimono-dressed girl, who seemed worried and concerned rather than angered like her friend.

"… You again!" Bruno exclaimed.

"Who else did you expect? Nathaniel? Psst. He has no chance of even punching a sixth grader," the boy, Aster, mocked.

Bruno's eyebrows brushed up against each other, forming a mad expression. "Why do you hate me so much anyways?" Bruno asked.

Aster evidently got confused by the look on his face. "What made you come to that conclusion? We only saw each other twice!" Aster answered back.

Bruno snarled. "And in those two times, you tried to beat me up?"

Aster scoffed at that. "Fair point, Bruno! But, uh, there is a reason why," Blossom interrupted.

"Reason?" Bruno quickly questioned.

Aster pinned Bruno to the wall once again, even harder this time. Bruno led out a harsh sound of pain.

"Shut up! That goes for you too, Blossom!" Aster shouted. Blossom rolled her eyes in the background, obviously being so done with Aster's antics at that point. "You know what you did this morning, right?" Aster asked, almost pointing at Bruno. "Yeah? I just walked into Class 4… by accident! Why are you so defensive about the class?" Bruno asked.

Aster growled loudly. "We Class 4 students are devoted to defending our class from outsiders unless they're authorized to! And you… You're not one of them!" Aster explained, almost yelling.

"Aster, look, I—"

Bruno got stopped by a familiar voice from the background… "He's a new student?" it said.

To the far right of Aster and Bruno, though slowly getting closer and closer, is Alex. Bruno sighed deeply with relief while Aster sighed.

"Beating up new students again, huh? And this time you've got a real target! Lucky you," Alex jokingly said while approaching the scene. "It's not my fault that your own student walked in!" Aster spoke back. Alex raised his eyebrow once being at a close distance to Aster. "And that student being… the prince of Class 2?" Alex asked.

Blossom gasped. She thought high of Class 2's royalty—or any kind of high role student anyways—so upon hearing that, she just couldn't believe that such a

new student has gotten such a role! “R-Really!?” Blossom said while gasping. “He is my seat partner, so it shouldn’t be much a surprise,” Alex said.

“You Class 2 goons have a ridiculous leadership system… seriously…” Aster insulted.

“And you Team Toxic goons have got a ridiculous target system! Now, shoo away from my newest student—and future king—please! Or else I’ll… be telling your leaders about this,” Alex threatened.

Blossom shivered, hiding behind Aster. Aster facepalmed, then glared at Bruno subtly. Bruno paralyzed slightly from it. “This won’t be the last time you’ll see I and Bloss, Bruno. Oh… not at all… And not you too Alex… But it’s been this way since we stopped being friends…” Aster hissed as he walked away with Blossom.

“See you Mar—Bruno!” Blossom stuttered, almost mistaking him for another name. Supposedly a classmate of hers?

Bruno was frozen, not only from the glare but from the last statement Aster made about Alex.

“Alex, you were friends with them?” Bruno asked. Alex sighed, scratching his head. “It’s a long story, but yes, I was friends with them! Actually, I was a part of Team Toxic,” Alex explained. “Team Toxic? As in that group mentioned ear—” Bruno got stopped by Alex shushing his mouth. “I’ll explain later. Just get to the bathroom already before you urinate yourself,” Alex told Bruno.

Bruno realized. Smiling awkwardly, he ran to the bathroom, almost forgetting that he actually went there to cry about his former friends. Instead, now he just wants to think about what just happened. He began to realize something once he entered a toilet stall.

“Why does this feel so… Familiar? Have I been here before?” Bruno asked himself.

He panned down at the palms of his hands, its backside was facing the white-tiled floor of the bathroom. Those hands started shaking. He strung his heart with his hands to it, although he was actually facing his hands to his chest.

“Why do I feel like I know them? And why do I feel like they know something I don’t? Am I just going crazy? I mean, I can’t be, right? I’m just a normal boy, there’s no way I am feeling this way genuinely! I guess I just didn’t have enough sleep…”

“Did I…?”

Bruno shook his head and started tearing up, only now remembering what happened between him and his former friends. It’s as if his true memories turned back on again, and the one he just remembered made his bullies disappear.

But the question would always linger in his mind from that point onwards.

Have they met before?

Chapter 5
Classes

After the break, Bruno, along with his classmates, returned to Class 2. Well, he came later than most in the class. His sense of direction hasn't really been defined as of now. Nonetheless, he's still confident that can navigate his way through the school by the end of the day.

Eventually, Bruno reached his classroom, which there were eighty percent of students there. Those twenty percent are most likely just stuck in the bathroom of the school or are busy with inter-class affairs. Bruno didn't mind it—only wanting to just sit down and absorb everything else in the room.

Surprising him was that the teacher was already there. While Bruno believed that the chemistry teacher, named Mr. Adam Mutton, had been in the classroom a minute before he did, Mutton was actually there since the beginning of the break. How did he know this? By Alex.

"How surprising… Again…" Alex sighed.

Bruno gazed at Alex with confused eyes.

"What is it?" Bruno asked. "Mr. Mutton is early—like always. Coming before the period even started… And today he came in the beginning of the last one!" Alex explained with a bit of a frustrated tone. Bruno snickered. He had never met such a teacher so he wouldn't really understand what Alex truly meant.

Once all the students came, Mr. Adam Mutton stood up from the wooden teacher's table and wrote something on the board.

"*Free Day!*" the board said.

All the students gasped and cheered, except for Bruno.

"What?" Bruno questioned as everyone started sitting down, grinning at each other. Bella, who was sitting behind Bruno, briefly explained what Mutton's words meant. "Mr. Chemistry is basically saying that we won't study anything today," Nadia added with, "If he says that, then there's a high chance other teachers will follow suit. They always plan things like this! Mostly on the first day of school or Christmas Eve though."

"Interesting!" Bruno pointed out.

"You didn't have things like this back in Brooklyn?" Bella asked. Nadia scoffed and shook her head. "Nope. Not even close. If we don't have ghosts back there, then we don't have these frequent 'free days' either, Isabella."

Bruno wore a warm smile while the girls talked. He turned his back on them.

After that, Winnie and Roselynn approached Nadia and Bella's desk. "Hey, girls," Winnie whispered, crouching to face Nadia and Bella.

Nadia and Bella were busy talking. Nadia was the first one to notice the other two girls standing behind Bella. Nadia tapped on Bella's shoulder to notify her of something. Bella turned her back just to find Winnie and Roselynn, making her jump a bit. "Oh! Uh, what is it my lovelies?" Bella stuttered.

Winnie giggled like a country girl. "Why—did you forget about something the three of us has to do every time a newbie comes into class?" Winnie asked, her hands behind her back. Bella sighed. "Right… I keep forgetting, darlings!" Bella sighed at herself.

Bruno, overhearing everything, pretended he didn't by bending his back down on his table. He tapped his fingers on the wood and whistled subtly.

Suddenly, Bella, Winnie and Roselynn appear in front of Bruno. "Hello, Bruno! Or should I call ya Bruno Boy?" Winnie joked. Bruno giggled, facing his head up at the girls. "What do you want, hm?" Bruno asked, smiling.

Nadia sighed, rolled her eyes a bit. "They'll tour you through the class… and maybe even explain to you about stuff. I remember when they did this to me," she explained. Bella chuckled. "You're correct, my friend! Now, let's begin!" Bella responded.

Bruno gets out of his seat, though pulled by Roselynn. "Follow my scent—then you'll know the true essence of the class," Roselynn harmonized. Winnie scoffed at Roselynn, knowing of the nonsense that Roselynn always spews. "Yes, like that makes any sort of sense," Winnie sarcastically replied.

Bruno stared awkwardly at the three girls, who were just standing in front of him, somewhat talking a bit. "Excuse us, friendo! Let's begin already," Winnie declared.

Winnie pulled Bruno to the teacher's table where Mutton was sitting at. "This here is the teacher's desk! Or table as some might call it," Winnie introduced. "Here

is where the teacher works. Right now is Mr Chemistry," Bella added. Mutton noticed the teens behind his desk. He popped his head out of the laptop that was once covering him and smiled at the four.

"Introducing the new boy around, huh? How nice!" Mutton said.

"Oh, we're just volunteering, sir. It was Zina's idea that we should tour around new students of the class," Bella explained.

Bruno turned his head as soon as he heard the name 'Zina' said out of Bella's mouth. "Zina? Who the heck is Zina?" Bruno asked. The girls froze. Mutton, unaware of Zina's existence since he's a fairly recent teacher, was just as perplexed as Bruno. Roselynn fixed her gaze at Alex before sighing and beginning to explain things to Bruno.

"Zina is the first leader of Class 2. She was succeeded by now students of Class 4, Phoebe and Shannon, although temporarily. Eventually, she ruled the two cruel leaders out and "banished" them to Class 4… though she really just expelled them out of the class. Zina came back as leader but not for long. She died as soon as she did. She then passed down her role as leader to her seat partner and closest friend… Alex."

Bruno's eyes were that of shock and horror. So those killings were true? And the class he stumbled into and almost got punched by a Gothic boy actually meant something to his class? It seemed he has a lot to learn about his school before he could feel like he'd fit in. He's lucky he even knows anyone in the school before or formed relationships!

"Anyways, let's continue this tour!" Winnie announced, ignoring anything dark Roselynn is implying—or is straight up telling Bruno.

Mutton simply stared at the students blankly as the story was told, and he still was when they were carrying on to the seat pairs.

"Here are what we dub "seat pairs." Every row has four tables, a pair of two tables go on the left and right. Yours is on the left along with mine, Nadia and everyone else on the left two columns. On the right are the right columns," Bella explained.

"But what really matters are the seat partners! Every column has their adjacent column as their seat partner. Let's take you and Alex as examples. Since he is on the column right beside the wall—which is on the straight left for you—he's your seat partner! And vice versa," Winnie added.

"Here are Craig and Sid on the first row. They're admittedly weird but we took a liking to them eventually!" Bella said. "There are Mandy and Maverick—the class clowns.

Then Max and Renard… They're weird too…

Spencer and Sheldon. They hate each other.

Connor and Casper—the quiet kids."

She continued going down, the others following down with her. "Then on the right, there are, well, Roselynn and Winnie here. Then Riley and Violet! We think they love each other," Bella snickered. The others held their laughs. Riley and Violet stared at the four with no emotion at all.

"We're not lovers," Riley deathly denied.

"We darn know they are…" Winnie whispered to Bruno. Riley yelled out a "*Not!*" before the four continued on forward.

"There's me and Nadia—you already know us! You and Alex… Then—" Bella got stopped and interrupted by Carly, who was sitting beside Sarah. "The great and magnificent Carly! With her sidekick Sarah," Carly introduced grandly. Sarah rolled her eyes once Carly said the last sentence.

"Right…" Bella sighed, trying her best to not look at Carly.

Bruno and the others returned to the chalkboard like they were at the beginning.

"Any questions?" Bella asked.

"Yeah… How do classes exactly work?" Bruno asked.

The girls blinked in sync, giving glances at each other soon after. "It's going to take all day…" Winnie broke the news. "How about this: Basically, there are four classes. Class 1, 2, 3 and 4. Each class has their own leader. Class 1 has a class president; we have a monarchy while Class 3 and 4 have leaders chosen by their teachers. We all go under the class system… but like Winnie said, that'd take *forever* to explain!" Bella explained quickly.

"Ah… I see! Sort of. This is totally different from my school. Back then, we just formed clans in recess, which don't even last long!" Bruno laughed.

Alex suddenly appeared behind everyone. "Were you talking about me?" Alex asked.

Everyone jumped—as they would.

"Oh, King Alex!

--Er Alex!" Winnie stuttered.

"Were you talking about the class system?" Alex asked. The girls nodded with a scared look. This, of course, confused Bruno even more than he should be.

Alex looked at Bruno's brown eyes. Bruno never felt this uncomfortable before—, not like those other times he had intimate eye contact with someone else before. After a moment, Alex closed his eyes as he said, "I shall explain the rest," Bruno gulped, feeling like he's going to get explained a plot of a eight-book novel series.

Even with the slightest glimpse he had of the class system that he had, he knew from the moment Alex started to stare at Bruno that things would be extremely complicated. This feeling is even confirmed by what Bella and Winnie warned Bruno earlier. Thankfully, he trusted Alex to simplify things.

"As you've heard from your guides, classes are divided into four: 1, 2, 3 and 4" Alex explained. Bruno rolled his eyes, remembering how his old school had names. He started to wonder why none of the classes adapted their name to be "cooler" to fit with the system, however.

"It's been by design from the school: But you should already know that. You have been in the other branch, and I've heard that their class naming system is the same," Alex added.

"What about the other grade batches?" Bruno suddenly asked. "Do they have the same system as us?"

"Not entirely. The grade that's going to succeed us, the Year 9 batch, is slowly adapting our way of dividing classes," Alex answered. "Oh, Alex! Have you heard? The Year 8 batch is slowly adapting it too!" Bella added, smiling quite awkwardly. Alex turned his back to look at the guide girls and silently blinked, instantly turning back to look at Bruno. He cleared his throat: "Perhaps that's true… But I haven't heard any mouths talking about it."

Bruno suddenly wanted to ask something. During the break, he didn't see anyone in two different classes have any close relationship—except Aster and Blossom, as well as Sarah and Nathaniel.

"By the way, Alex, I noticed that… Well… There are barely any different class relationships. Why is that?" Bruno asked.

Alex raised a hardy eyebrow, then swept his head away from Bruno. Bruno could barely make out a scowl from the class king.

"That's because relationships between two students of different classes are forbidden. *Romantic* relationships," Alex cleared up in the end. Bruno's eyes widened. He assumed Aster and Blossom were in a relationship, but from what Alex is implying (and the fact he knew them since forever), they aren't. "How about Sarah and Nathaniel?" Bruno asked. Alex scoffed, flipping his head once again. "They started and only work on their romantic endeavors outside of school," Alex answered.

"But why? Why are friendships allowed but not couples?" Bruno then asked.

"Because couples tend to avoid conflicts between their classes if their different classes are involved. They'd be too much in "the love zone" to even focus on a fair battle. At least friends can understand and accept the fact that they must go through things that way," Alex answered.

Suddenly, his head strayed behind him. During this whole, it seemed like Alex's head took a rollercoaster, yet it felt so straight for Bruno at the moment.

"I won't be surprised if it's because Hannah or Pips have their broken relationships with students from another class though…" sighed Alex. His voice was quiet enough to not be heard by Bruno, however. "You'll get used to that rule, though I believe you'll follow it very well. Don't be a moth to a flame," Alex advised.

Bruno watches Alex's mouth move so eloquently. He has never met anyone like him! Except maybe when Max tries to act "smart," Bruno can't even blame himself for believing Alex is pulling an act to sound "great" and "wise" to his classmates!

"Sometimes, the classes have war… It shouldn't sound so surprising to anyone. We used to have wars from the littlest of rumors; it was ridiculous! As for the history... The system was formed back in second grade by a girl named Hannah. She was such a clever member of Class 4—she still is although her role as leader has been replaced," Alex explained.

He began to show a smirk on his face. Bruno was curious about what Alex is going to say next, considering the fact that he has such a smile. "There was voting for Class 2's leader. I felt like the vote happened just yesterday!" he followed with laughter.

Winnie and Bella laugh along while Nadia and Roselynn both stay silent. The former because, well, she wasn't around when the first vote happened; Alex was already leader when Nadia arrived. Roselynn, on the other hand, was just being herself.

Alex sure wasn't wrong, and there's no way Bruno could make a lapse in judgment in that! Despite the way everyone seems to have worded it, the class runs on a "monarchy" which means the leader's seat partner (the student sitting adjacent to them) is going to be the next leader, ergo there has only been one time the students needed to vote, which is Year 2.

Still, Bruno would've assumed at the time that they were referring to the other classes. From what he saw, the other classes seemed harsher and not as soft as Class 2 are. It wouldn't be a surprise if they really *were* talking about the other classes. Of course, Bruno has really only seen briefly of the classes—those being in the form of meeting Aster and Blossom, interacting somewhat with other students and breaking up with his old friends.

"What happened?" Bruno asked after a moment of silence.

"Well, I and the "Zina" girl your guide keeps mentioning…" Alex slightly hissed, staring back at the girls. "… We were running for president."

"You too, huh?" Bruno asked again. "Let me guess: You lost?" he added.

Alex embarrassingly nodded slightly, trying to not let his beanie down. It wouldn't even be a surprise if Alex was blushing when tilting his blonde head.

"But it wasn't much of a landslide. In retrospect, I believe Zina would be a better fit anyhow. I was such a fool for believing someone like me would lead a bunch of children like those! Thank Mother that everyone in this class even matured unlike Class 3!" Alex told Bruno. Bruno giggled.

Bella had a sassy look on her face—an almost iconic one for her. She joked, "Are we not going to talk about how you still read Woodland Cats? Or how Carly and Sarah still act like they're bullies who came straight out of a high school drama?" A flip-mirror Bella was holding was open wide, as it was when Alex was awkwardly explaining the votes to Bruno. It shut when Bella was done with her statements.

Alex rolled his eyes—as he usually does when he has to "listen" to Bella. "Ignore her, she's the real one who hasn't matured…" Alex sighed. Bruno blankly stares at Alex, then blinked, looking like he didn't have any thought in his head. "You still read Woodland Cats?" he suddenly snickered.

"Besides *that* point… Class 2 was in the pure leadership of Zina. Of course, I was next in line as Zina's prince… although it didn't work out as expected seeing as Phoebe and Shannon had too much power in the teacher's hearts," Alex continued explaining, ignoring what was being said earlier.

"Teacher's hearts?" Bruno asked.

Alex nodded. "One of the most important parts of being class leader is to be the true leader in a teacher's heart. There's no way students would follow or respect you if the teacher doesn't," he answered.

Bruno nodded, agreeing with Alex's point. That could really be common knowledge, but perhaps it isn't for a simple-minded individual like Bruno.

Mutton watches the commotion in the background with his ocean blue eyes one of his prized students explaining such a system to a new student.

Mutton, like the other teachers, has no knowledge of the class system. The least they ever knew are the fights the system causes. Wars are notorious between classes, *especially* Class 3 and 4. Because of those two classes' mirrored ideals, it's difficult for its members to make up and live happily ever after like with Class 2 and 1 (although it can be argued the pair also has a rivalry!).

"Are those the cause of those… useless fights?" Mutton stuttered halfway, wanting to find a word better than 'dumb wars.'

The girls hesitantly nodded, trying to appease Alex while doing so. Alex is known to be a boy of traditions; always following the rules like a straight line and rarely—if ever—breaks it. It's even rumored that his need to follow rules is what caused (at least) half his friends to cut him off.

Any word of criticism towards those matters, and Alex has the potential to rip your ears out!

Bruno didn't know any of this, of course. He barely even knew why the four segregated classes were so important! How could anyone—let alone Alex—expect him to?

Naturally, Bruno's simple mind answered, "Who's to say it isn't? From what I'm hearing right now, it could be possible! Heck, it's definitely the case!"

Alex stared at Bruno. A dry blink came about from him. Bruno stood still for a couple of seconds before noticing that someone was looking at him, before finding his seat partner staring at him.

Bruno flinched.

"What? A-Alex!" Bruno cried. "I'm sorry. I didn't even know what was so offensive about it."

Alex sighed. "The ways of the classes may be difficult for you at first. Class wars are definitely going to be new to you…" Alex said while turning his head to the textured floor. He kept his head up, soon saying "But you'll get used to it." His assurance soon extended to Mutton. "Perhaps *you* too. I believe it'd actually be great if the teachers *do* know about what *"games," the*ir students are playing."

Alex's suggestion opened the surrounding students' eyes.

The main reason why students kept the system away from teachers is mainly because: They'd believe the students are silly and that they should stop doing this. However, now that the students are teenagers, what would stop the teachers from accepting the system? It's clear now that they're old enough to comprehend their actions.

Silence emerged. The students got anxious—even the ones who aren't involved like Max and Renard. Then…

"BAHAHAHAAHAHA!" Mutton suddenly laughed.

Bruno gulped. Other students were silent but smiling, which confused Bruno even more. Shouldn't they be reacting even greater than a silly smile?

"Wow! Am I so proud of you, not gonna lie! You kids really are geniuses! I mean, back in my day, students could only roleplay as cops and robbers—now look at you! Playing as presidents, kings, whatever you bring into class wars!" Mutton praised.

Finally, it clicked to Bruno. The laugh was of pleasurable joy, not any insulting kind Bruno usually expects of a teacher. It's not mistaken anymore that Mutton is quite the joyous teacher! It seems that way for Bruno.

"Anyways, I won't try to get the teachers into it… but I'd like to! I don't know why I didn't know any of this last year, but nothing to fret about that," Mutton said, quite crumbly and not quite as bright as his last speech.

The chemistry teacher relaxes on his seat by then, for the conversation seemed to have ended. This couldn't be clearer than when the students stopped turning their heads to Mutton at the teacher's desk.

Bruno picks up his chemistry book. Even if he wasn't asked to, he peeked inside the book. Flipping the pages, a bunch of future lessons are seen by Bruno.

This is a habit of Bruno at every beginning of the school year. In the first day alone, he has to check almost all the lessons of all the subjects that come for the day. He believes that this way, he can prepare for the future chaos that will arrive at his doorstep in the second semester.

This habit is seen as odd to other students. Who would want to check out what to be anxious about in the future? It's like checking out the cost of a future house you're planning to live in when you're 13 or trying to ask a "psychic" about how a recent relationship will end!

Other than those thoughts haunting Bruno's mind while turning shiny pages, he thought about how the lessons in of itself would go. What antics might ensue during the periods to come. His old school was chaotic enough; this new one with a seemingly hectic class system (that was agreed among students) and curious students should definitely bring immense surprise!

Bruno then looked at Mutton for some advice on the school. Mutton seemed to be an old grunt and thus has been in this school for, what felt to Bruno, eons. Who's to say that he won't know the ways of this school? At the very least, he could ask Mutton some questions about chemistry to get him started.

The brown-haired boy approaches Mutton like a wimp. His legs subtly twisted and twirled in anxiety while walking. His head kept telling him to walk like "a normal person" like he usually is.

Bruno touched the wooden table, thankfully not mistakenly reaching for the stack of chemistry books that aren't even from the school. Even more gratefully, he didn't reach for Mutton coffee mug! He knew that touching and spilling it could cause such a ruckus.

Mutton notices Bruno and turns his head to him, previously looking at Craig and Sid who were sitting right beside him.

"Hello… Bruno, right?" Mutton asked softly.

"Yes!" Bruno smiled. "I know this is sudden but… would you mind if you could… lend me some advice?"

Mutton raised his thin right eyebrow up, while the left eyebrow kept itself still, slightly sliding down. "Advice for what?" Mutton's voice not trying to seem intimidating.

“About the school… You know I’m new here and, well, I assume you’ve always been here? If you are, then you can just… tell me. I’m really confused, even if my classmates spent an entire period explaining the ways of the school… It’s really different from mine,” Bruno stuttered along the way.

As soon as he heard it, Mutton head was stirring with a bunch of words for the young man. Finally, he came up with something. “Well, if you want to know…” Mutton built up by saying it. “Then my best piece of advice around here is: Go with the flow!” he smiled suddenly. “This school is full of surprises. I could surmise that as soon as I started working here! For me, that’s what really makes this school so different and marvelous for me. I think that is what’s going to amaze you about this school. Enjoy this school while you last in it is what I’m saying!”

Bruno had sparkling eyes during the speech. He never expected a teacher would say that to him in the first day of school, although he did ask for it. “Really?” Bruno smiled. Craig snickered beside the two, stepping into the conversation. “Of course! Heh heh heh!” Craig laughed. “It’s confusing at first, but you’ll get the hang of it! Plus, teacher’s right… this place is insane!” he added. Bruno laughed.

Chapter 6
Missing

Moments later, Mutton was continuously speaking. The students were stretching their arms or resting on their tables. Only a select few were actually listening to him. Whoever was seen talking are forcefully shushed by Mutton, an oddly tempered action for him.

What caused the teacher to speak like this is because Sid asked him to talk about the other classes. He believed that, if he prompted Mutton to talk about the other students in the other classes, it'd inform Bruno more about the school.

… Like Sid's other ideas, it's not effective whatsoever…

His conversation that was supposed to be about the other students turned into a spoken essay about how extraordinary Mr. Adam's daughter, Mary, is.

"I remember when we were at the beach last summer…" Mutton recalled. He was slanting his leg on the teacher's table. The chair looking like it'll fall at any moment, Mutton luckily having a good grip on the brown table.

With his leather boots touching the table, and the teacher's big mouth still speaking, Bruno laid his elbow on his textured wooden table (that isn't actually wooden). He noticed Alex sometimes taking glances.

"She brought her friends in… er… do any of you remember?" Mutton asked.

There came a moment of silence. Well, only half a minute. None of the current members of Class 2 were Class 3 members formerly (Class 3 is the class where Mary currently is a member of). As a matter of fact, it's the only class that didn't have any members move to Class 2. It's believed that it might change this year, but that happens almost every year.

The silence was broken by Carly, who did have a friend who moved to Class 3 but keeps in contact with them.

"Chelsea?" Carly asked with her odd Californian accent.

"No! I think it's Tara and Ella!" Sarah corrected.

Carly glared at Sarah as soon as the latter finished their sentence. That made Sarah flinch and the pupils dilate.

Mutton ignored the two girls' flinches and glares for he was going to state something. "Ah! Those two girls! Right!" He followed it with a slight laugh.

The students stared at him. Maverick had a single blink at him. "How do you not know their names?" Bruno asked, not raising his hand like usual.

Mutton's fingers danced around, his eyes steered in another direction, away from the students. Sweat emanated out of his skin. "They're quiet kids…" he lied, at least partially. Tara and Ella weren't particularly the loudest kids, but they definitely are louder than the majority of other classes—definitely not compared to Class 1 members of course!

"And we're not going to talk about how literally *all* of Class 3 gets out of their classroom and dances around like it's some Stella and the Stars music video!" Maverick comically, and quickly, stated.

His classmates snickered and some even sneered.

Mutton ignored the classroom's remarks about Class 3. He knows about the other classes' resentment for each other, and he had a feeling of ignoring it at this point.

"Well, where was I…?" he asked.

He didn't get a response but remembered anyways.

"Ah, yes!" he brightened up. "Her, I, and her friends were at the beach. I was swimming when I suddenly saw my daughter riding on dolphins! Yes! Dolphins!" Mutton was laughing.

Bruno was conjuring up the silly image in his head of a teenager riding a dolphin. A dolphin at thirty-seven miles per hour! He tried to hold himself from snickering at the thought of a person his age—let alone his daughter—riding a dolphin that fast as if they were a horse! He knew that snickering would kind of interrupt the "conversation" going on and perhaps would even extend it even further than he was comfortable with (as if it wasn't long and boring enough already).

"I swear, I also saw one her friends—I think she was wearing a blue swimsuit—kissing another dolphin! Kissing it!" he repeated.

Nadia rolled her eyes while Bella has her eyes spark like electricity—totally opposite reactions to bare eyes—but quite the same on the inside. Bella is the enthusiastic sort.

"Anyways—with Mary—the dolphin took her underwater. Ooh! I sank down and saw it! Her hair flowing with the waves… Going up and down…" he described.

Bruno's ears began to wear out the more Mutton talked about how amazing his daughter and her friends were at the beach. It was fairly uncomfortable for his classmates, from what he sees at least. It was that way for him, why not for the others?

Suddenly, a voice came from the right side.

"He always talks about her…" a now-familiar voice said.

Bruno turned his head to the right to see Alex's mouth moving.

"You mean Mr. Chemistry… *Always* talks about this Mary girl?" Bruno whispered the best he could.

Alex quietly nodded. "Most of us believe he's trying to get a boyfriend for her… It isn't working for me since… I'm not into love anymore," said Alex quietly.

Bruno agreed, but only nodded instead of saying anything. He was already making noise beforehand, making more might put some trouble into his name.

"Who is she anyways? I mean, judging by what he's saying, she's definitely in this school," Bruno asked, adding that later on. Alex nodded, the quick wind making a wispy noise. "Indeed. She's a member of Class 3, and she's one of the original ones… Well… I suppose she is… I haven't seen much of Class 3 before I became leader," Alex answered.

At this point, the two turned their bodies to each other. Their entire bodies, not only their heads. It was obvious they weren't lending any of their ears to Mutton. But the oblivious teacher did not notice at all, expectedly.

Their hiding efforts vanished as soon as Bella joined in.

"Ah! Mary! That snotty girl! Always having an equally snotty grill," Bella harmonized.

"Shush it, Bella. Mary isn't even as annoying as the rest of Class 3," Nadia said with agile.

Bruno giggled. "No need to explain more. Alex told me enough, I hope."

"He sure did…" Nadia sighed. "Hey, what lesson is next?" Bruno asked, wishing to steer the conversation in another direction.

Nadia and Bella held her fingers to their chins, thinking—or remembering—about the schedule. "It should be…"

Bella was stopped by the ringing of the school bell.

"RING-A-RING-A-RING!" the bell shouted.

"SPARRING CLASS!" the entire class yelled in unison, except Bruno, Alex, Nadia, and Bella. The four were caught off-guard.

"Ooh! Looks like my time has come!" Mutton whistled. "Don't worry, children! I'll be giving you all *real* lessons tomorrow morning!"

He promised this while the students got themselves prepped up. A bunch of them were jogging in place to energize or flipping bottles in excitement before they heard the news. "Aww!" they all cried.

Mutton breezed himself out the door. No students wished him a good day. Not an act of common courtesy. It was pretty clear everyone was disappointed. They should've relished the period of "freedom" even if they had to endure listening to a teacher wind on about their child riding dolphins on the beach, or about their daughter having soccer practice with the beefy Cooking teacher, Munz Baker.

Bruno watched as his classmates run out of the classroom door. Rushing in just to not miss Sparring class.

It's notable that in the original Brooklyn branch, there was no such thing as a "Sparring" class despite its crime rate being almost as high (if not higher) than Manhattan's. To anyone, a class such as sparring should be required for any school, not only Open Book School.

Alex was the only student who didn't follow the herd of students. Instead, he stayed by Bruno's side. He was standing, however. Despite his short size and whimsical stance, Alex's power put Bruno into such amusement. Bruno gazed up at Alex, his mouth almost wide open. Bruno shook his head, remembering that Alex was supposedly the new friend that he had made.

Before Bruno could spit out any words, Alex started walking towards the door. His feet carried him to it before it could close. The boy stared at the distance where his classmates ran. Bruno blinked before getting up. His chair and table get pushed to opposite directions as he steps towards his friend.

"Why aren't you going with them?" Bruno asked.

"Same reason as you," Alex responded hastily.

"I'm confused, that's why I'm not going. Are you confused too?" Bruno asked quite sarcastically.

Alex hummed quietly with his mouth still shut, soon opening it. “No, but I’d like to ask if you’ve ever had this class before,” he replied, trying to change the subject.

Bruno knew of the trick but played along anyways. “No. Not at all!” he quietly chuckled and smiled.

“Come on, let’s go. I’m already feeling awkward,” he admitted.

Bruno didn’t see it, but Alex had a small smile on his face. Bruno was already dashing by the time Alex did so.

On the way downstairs to the gym, Alex started a conversation with Bruno.

“I can see you’re confused about why there’s such a craze about the class. You see, the students are crazy over it because sparring—or simply fighting—is such an essential and fun skill to learn. Well, I believe it’s essential. The others believe it’s fun,” Alex explained. “It’s the best class for others is what I’m saying!”

“What’s the best class for you?” Bruno asked.

Alex stared at Bruno, looking like he didn’t hear him. Bruno didn’t know if Alex was pretending to not hear him because he was so offended by a question that might’ve had an obvious answer, or Alex genuinely couldn’t hear Bruno. The latter can be reasoned with the fact that they were passing a group of sound-generating ninth graders at the lockers. Either way, Bruno felt obligated to repeat the question, but rewording it in case the first option is correct.

“What’s your favorite class?” Bruno repeated, now bearing a shaky smile.

“Math,” Alex answered.

Bruno had thoughts of Alex being a “nerd” in his head. Perhaps that answer confirms it. Alas, he can’t always judge a book by its cover—or answer. That goes the same for Alex.

“Honestly, I don’t believe the vast majority of these… non-thought-provoking subjects belong in schools…” Alex added. “Except swimming.”

Bruno smirked, knowing what Alex really meant by the last two words Alex blurted. Although Bruno wanted to express his objection to the matter, he felt like saying nothing is a better option than starting a war in front of 15-year-olds who might join in. Never less a war with his new friend and his class leader!

Silence followed the short conversation. The only sounds to be heard were the now-far murmurs of the ninth graders and the squeaking footsteps of the two boys.

Eventually, they reached the gym which was at the end of the corridor of Floor 2. The huge facility rooms are a good reason why the grades are so divided by the ground level they're in. There's only space for some empty classrooms in the highest floor and that's it.

The gym that the duo entered had a wide area. Very much so. What compensated was the equipment. There were treadmills, multiple épée for potential extra fencing classes, shelves of helmets, balls, and gloves for multiple sports. There were also three tennis tables arranged vertically to the left side of the gym. All equipped with tennis rackets and small lime tennis balls. Bruno could only picture so much of what his classmates would do with those.

"Oh, Alex! Bruno! Finally! You two took forever!" Bella whined.

"Well… she isn't wrong…" Nadia whispered, her eyes attempting to escape looking at the boys.

The other classmates took notice of the duo—mostly at Alex for he's the leader. It's expected that class leaders would arrive at the same time as their classmates. It seems that day is an exception. Out of any day, it wasn't a good day for that exception to come by either.

Bruno and Alex took their time to notice that something was off… well, Alex did. None of the teachers were there. Not even one of them.

There were two teachers for sparring classes since the subject became a thing for the school. Those were Mr. Bruce Lane and Mr. Jackie Lane, two twin brothers who were skilled martial artists. They wished to teach the students the ways of fighting the same way they were taught when they were kids. Sadly, that couldn't be done on the first day of school, all because they weren't there.

"Has… anyone seen them today?" Alex asked, turning his head away from the ground he was staring at before.

Everyone shook their heads together.

Bruno noticed one didn't, however, who is seemingly Connor. He could tell by the height of the boy and the cotton white sweater he was wearing. Bruno stayed silent. He knew that Connor was a quiet and shy boy. It'd be natural if he was too meek to say anything in this situation.

"Odd…" Alex said under his breath. His hand quenched and held his head up under his chin.

Sheldon turned his back to see the janitor who was sweeping the floor off any gunk.

"Maybe *he* knows," Sheldon whispered to Riley, subtly pointing at the faraway janitor. The latter didn't react to anything, only looking at his friend.

Bruno watches as Sheldon slowly steps towards the janitor. His steps were fairly janky, but it wasn't unexpected of Sheldon. Despite his athleticism, Sheldon has a short physique. What made it worse was the floor. It was clear and slightly wet, possibly because of the man Sheldon was approaching towards.

"Hi! Hello, Mr. Janitor sir!" Sheldon smiled. The janitor, who actually knew Sheldon was coming up to him, stared at the boy, waiting for more statements to come up. When he didn't get it, the janitor responded with "Hello… Boy…"

Sheldon ignored the obvious awkward tone of the janitor.

"Have you seen the two teachers who are supposed to be here?" he asked, going straight to the point, no beating around the bush for him. At this point, everyone in the class, who was having their own conversations, turned their attentions to watching the interaction in case anything gets answered.

"Bruce and Jackie? If you're talking about them, then no," the janitor answered bluntly. "I went through most of the school from the early morning 'till now and I haven't seen them at any of those times either. Just other teachers," he added.

The students exchanged glances at each other, perplexed by the janitor's answer. No sight of their sparring teachers not even by the janitor whose job is to go around the school and clean up messes? On the first day of school too? That doesn't add up!

While it's possible that the brothers were in a dire situation that day, things just… didn't feel right either. In the students' guts, it was clear that there was something off. This was especially so for Bruno.

The janitor took sight of the frowning students. It looked like he wanted to ignore it, but he just couldn't. "Hey, this is a good opportunity for you, y'know? You get to skip a class without any repercussions!" the janitor grinned at them, now wanting to cheer them up.

The students ignored it though. It's abnormal for middle school students to listen to staff members of a school anyways, let alone a janitor.

"What will we do without sparring!?" Bella cried.

"Why can't we just spar by ourselves?" Bruno suddenly asked.

The class, who were forming a slight circle, collectively peered at Bruno. “We need referees, Bruno…” Maverick sighed, wanting to facepalm badly. “Obviously.” Mandy added. Bruno grinned awkwardly.

Alex turned to Connor, who had been quiet the entire time. It was believable why Alex would do that too. Bruno noticed that something was off about Connor earlier, perhaps he would know what’s going on—even if a literal staff member denied the presence of the teachers.

“Connor, have you seen the teachers?” Alex asked.

The surrounding students were confused. Sheldon has already asked the janitor, why ask another one of them?

Alex ignores the obvious confusions of his classmates to hear what Connor has to say.

Supposedly, the reason why Connor was asked is because Connor is one of the first—if not the first—student who arrives at the school premises. He is the most reliable student to listen to in situations like this as he does meet teachers when arriving. He’s simply *that* early!

“I… I actually have…!” Connor answered, almost shuddering. That scared the whole class. “I can’t exactly remember where they were though… I was only walking up the stairs. They were underneath it… I’m sorry, I really am, but it’s all I remember,” Connor explained.

“It’s ok, Connor. You explained enough… and better than the janitor…” Alex scoffed at the last statement.

So Connor’s answer explains what Bruno has been seeing of him. How odd Connor has been acting earlier. It’s all because he believes something horrid might’ve happened to the teachers.

While Bruno was eased of his concern, the others grew tense as soon as Connor said that. Bundles of explanations can only be stirred by the class, ranging from light-hearted to the worst outcomes.

“What if they got kidnapped!?” one suddenly yelled out.

“Or maybe… GOT EXECUTED BY DUNKEL!” Bella screamed.

The janitor in the back kept on rolling his eyes and trying his best to ignore what’s going on. Sweeping the floor dry.

Silence emerged after that.

"Yeah, I don't think the headteacher is even legally allowed to do that…" Spencer sighed, breaking the awkward silence. Bella's eyes glowed up at Spencer, glaring at him as if he were a TV screen. "It's not impossible!" she wailed.

"Whatever happens to them, we just have to trust that the school is aware and trying their best to take action on finding them," Alex assured the class. He was stepping to the middle of the jagged circle the class formed in the middle of the gym. "Besides… They're good as being absent," he added with melancholy.

Bruno thought about Alex's last statement. He soon ran with it.

"That's perfectly possible…" Bruno agreed, adding with a bit of a hesitant tone. "Why is that idea so out of left field for you all anyways?" he asked.

The students stared at him in unison. Bruno could've just committed a sin against humanity. As if he said something so offensive that, if the entire human population were present, they'd all share eye contact with Bruno.

"It's obvious, Bruno! Obvious!" Bella cried.

Bruno rolled his eyes. His mind was quite scrambled from this mess, but he still has a bit of sense in him—unlike the stunted sense his classmates have. They probably share a braincell for all he knows! Still, he wanted to speak his mind and share his "outsider" opinions.

"No?" he bluntly answered. "Excuse me—have you all forgotten that I'm a newcomer?" he added hastily after, a shrug came while he said it.

His classmates then stayed silent but didn't stare anymore. They were simply standing still.

"Sorry," one quietly apologized. Bruno didn't know who, but he suspected it was one of the more polite students.

Alex was the only one who was put into motion it seemed. While he was already standing close to Bruno before, he had to walk away from the near-center place of the circle. Once he arrived to Bruno, he asked "Indeed. Bruno, have you forgotten which city you're in?" "If anyone doesn't come as they expected… then a world of horrors will come out!" he said, raising his voice to make a point.

Bruno's eyes widened, only remembering it now because of how friendly and soft the class system made things. He already couldn't wrap his head around that, now the horrors would make things even worse!

"Of course, I'm not *denying* that they can't be absent… but I must agree with my classmates… *Our classmates,"* Alex added, now having raspy vocals.

At that point, the brown-haired boy was intimidated only by the tone of Alex's voice. While Bruno has always characterized Alex as a nerd (even if he only knows him for a day), he always forgot that Alex has authority over the class. He certainly isn't the stereotypical nerd from movies… rather an actual genius.

Moments of silence ensued, which caused the students' collective boredom to take over them and begin to do… something. The girls played table tennis or volleyball, while the boys were either watching or (the more daring ones) spar. Spencer wished to do some fencing at some point, but it didn't seem possible without a referee, and everyone knows that none of the boys have the skills to be a referee, not even Alex!

As for Bruno?

He wasn't doing anything. Luckily, he wasn't the only one. Connor and Casper weren't either. Alex seemingly wasn't either, but perhaps reading a book counts. It's a mystery how Alex even brought the book. It couldn't have come from some pocket dimension, and Alex couldn't have taken the book. However, Bruno ignored it, and the other students didn't want to question their leader about anything that might further his stress from earlier.

Bruno stared out of a tall window that somehow had a smaller window a few inches on top of it. He could only see the skyscrapers, trees and dozens of houses that span through many neighborhoods in the distance. His sigh created a vapor on the glass. Usually, Bruno would draw a face on it, but he didn't that day. He was just *that* tired.

Wishing that he could feel the outside world, the boy let his hand touch the window, clearing it of the vapor his breath produced and giving him the illusion of touching the fresh, green grass. The comforts of his home felt so far, he felt like only an airplane could take him there instead of a bus.

The reason why Bruno had such feelings is because he's been in the gym for what felt like forever. He had the sinking feeling that he and his classmates would be trapped in the gym, even when another class needed it.

On another window adjacent to Bruno's was Connor leaning his elbow on the hanging window casing. It seemed like Connor was on the same depressive thought train as Bruno.

Suddenly… Connor felt a sensation!

"Eugh!" he shrieked.

Casper noticed instantly. Before that, he was only leaning on the wall, trying to find a chance to initiate a conversation. It looked like those chances had dropped to zero percent by that point sadly.

"Connor?!" Casper yelled.

Connor ignored Casper's calling of his name to hop to Alex. Bruno noticed almost as quickly as Casper. He also witnessed Connor approaching Alex in what was probably the most embarrassing way to approach someone of power. Connor was lucky that it was Alex who was in power!

"Alex! May I go to the bathroom?" Connor asked.

Alex raised his eyebrows. "Sure…?" he answered. Alex was most probably weirded out by how a student suddenly asked the leader to go to the bathroom. It may not be uncommon; it still is strange in Class 2. Students are usually afraid to go to the bathroom without the teacher's permission in the class—especially Connor.

Connor's legs juggled off to the bathroom.

Bruno didn't think much of it. Quiet kids tend to be to have experience in embarrassing bathroom moments anyways and Connor didn't seem to be an exception.

After some time, Riley was playing some sort of hockey-like game with Sheldon. Well, the two were playing hockey with a bottle cap as its hockey puck. Renard and (reluctantly) Spencer joined in. Maverick was considering it too, but he'd rather "entertain," the audience with jokes that nobody actually listened to.

At some point, Riley slipped. His face became a pancake on the floor. "Oof!" shrieked Riley. Creating a loud thud on the floor, the students all took notice on what's going on.

Riley kept his head up (literally). His neck could barely extend out of the shiny floor that was, in reality, dry as a sandy desert. Thankfully, Riley could hold himself up. The impact wasn't that strong anyways. Still, he seemed to have some scrapes on his chest and face.

"Hoo wee!" Winnie whistled. "Ya seem rough!" she stated the obvious.

"Thanks… I don't think I needed to know that," Riley rolled his eyes while saying.

He took a look to his left side to see the door. "Huh, why haven't we just… got out?" he wondered, very clearly planning something. "Didn't the teachers say

we should stay in the classroom no matter what? At least the gym," Spencer explained, still holding onto his hockey stick that's faced down.

Riley thought about it. His head tilted up to the roof before it could bolt down. "I guess…" shrugged Riley.

Bruno could only watch what was going on, for he hadn't actually heard many of the school rules. He really only knows the basics that every school has. It's a mystery why they even keep restating the rules numerous times every year. To Bruno, most of these rules are simple human etiquette. While children may not understand them, certainly people his age would be able to understand, wouldn't they?

While Bruno's mind kept ruminating about that, Riley slowly started approaching the door.

Once Riley arrived at the light brown wooden door with translucent windows (black-colored), he tried to open it.

It didn't open.

Riley tried opening it once again.

Still nothing.

Riley now started to pull or push the doorknob the best he can. His grip was at its greatest, yet the door wouldn't budge. Still!

Even though the students couldn't see it, it was clear that Riley was having an expression of pure confusion. His eyebrows lifted above one another. An eye twitched while his mouth steadily turned to the side. Perhaps it could even be more obvious through the glossy door, reflecting Riley's face to be seen by his classmates.

"Oh Mother! What's going on here…?" Riley trembled as he asked.

"What's going on?" Casper asked, subtly acting oblivious.

"The door's locked, it seems!" Riley exclaimed.

Everyone exchanged glances. Murmurs uttered by the girls that can somewhat be heard a great distance away from Riley. *But how?* One whisper said. *Who could've locked it?* Another could be heard.

With no authority figure, except for Alex who was reluctant to do anything at that time to avoid trouble, the class went into chaos. Riley ignored what was going on behind him to try to make out how to open the door out of pure force. Of course, he didn't succeed whatsoever.

“That’s so weird!” he retorted. That stopped his classmates from talking as a crowd that was formed away from where they were doing their activities.

“There was nobody who went out. Nobody came in other than us. It couldn’t be Connor because he went to the bathroom here,” Riley said to evaluate possibilities.

“What if…” Violet said under her breath. “… IT WAS SOMEONE OUTSIDE!?” she screamed out. Max stepped in, scoffing. “It can’t be! Who would be out at this hour? All the teachers are in their rooms while the students can’t even have access to the keys. If it was a teacher, then why would they even lock us in?”

“That’s true…” Violet responded, accepting her theory’s defeat.

Riley groaned loudly, so much so that it faintly echoed in the vast, spatial room that is the gym. He turned his back away from the door, soon launching his body to the side he was previously facing at. He began to slide on his back, down to the floor where his full legs could touch it. It felt like he was sinking into an abyssal space.

“How am I going to get healed now?” he whimpered.

“Healed?” Roselynn asked, who has suddenly grown enthusiastic. Roselynn, without any response needed, dashes to her sitting classmate and scanned his screen like an x-ray. Riley barely got any time to react—let alone say anything.

The young man soon remembered why Roselynn impulsively jumped in to help him. “Rose, careful! Faces can’t exactly be healed with herbs or… whatever you use to heal us!” blabbered Riley. Roselynn didn’t look like she heard him. As a matter of fact, she continued scanning his skin for any bruises she could possibly heal. Sadly for her, Roselynn couldn’t detect anything too easy to heal.

“What happened?” Roselynn asked.

“Didn’t you see me trip?” Riley answered back with some snark. “I really just hurt my forehead and my toes,” he added with honesty.

The students slowly made their trip closer to Riley and Roselynn, who presented as being two halves of a sphere stuck together in the distance. Winnie was the only student who took a look around the large gym. She saw the recently painted walls, then the equipment, then her eyes flashed to where the janitor should be… Or where he *was*.

Winnie flinched at the sight of the absent janitor. “Mr Janitor?” she led out a silent cry.

The other students noticed Winnie's worried gestures. All their faces turned to her, including Roselynn and Riley. "What?" one student asked. "The janitor… he was righ' there, now he ain't!" Winnie exclaimed with her pigtails jumping without a sound while backing away to allow her classmate to view the area better.

"This place is getting weirder and weirder the more I stay…" Bruno mumbled to himself, his eyes rolling back, wanting to facepalm so badly but couldn't out of acting appropriately. "And it's only the third lesson…" he added to his quiet complaining.

"Perhaps he went to the bathroom too?" Alex considered.

Throughout this whole ordeal, Alex was trying his best to keep his subordinates in check. After all, it's a leader's duty to keep their classmates in check. If they don't, then it's guaranteed everything will fly into chaos territory!

"But Connor is in the bathroom… and there's only one toilet in the bathroom." Mandy answered back. Maverick snickered beside her, having such a wide smile that it had the chance to fall off his face. "Unless the janitor is a creep!" he joked. Mandy snickered alongside Maverick, although the latter laughed a lot louder.

Nadia scoffed at that. Because of her family, she believes a lot of Maverick's jokes are insensitive, this one included. It isn't the first time he's made that type of joke either to Nadia's disappointment. "Stalking is no joke!" shouted out Nadia.

Bruno, meanwhile, ignored his classmates to watch the bathroom himself (perhaps a "stalker" himself)… That's when he hears…

THUD!

A water bottle fell!

RUMBLE, RUMBLE!

CRASHHH!

There was no denying once the last sound could be heard…

There's a thunderstorm at play!

"Great, out of any time! Right when we feel like we're in a horror movie!" complained Renard with his hoarse voice. Bella gulped loudly, soon yelling out, "MAYBE WE *ARE* IN A HORROR MOVIE!"

The rain started growing stronger and stronger… building up to what seems to be the loudest thunder anyone in the room could've heard!

THUDDDD!

The thunder roared in such a powerful manner, that it almost fit perfectly with Bella's dramatic sentence! It's as if Bella predicted the perfect time the lightning would strike, although it didn't come at an *exact* time.

After another ear-piercing lightning stroke, there was a crash in the mere distance away from the students' ears. Everyone turned their backs to see in the dark meters away a silhouette of Connor panting audibly.

He became less of a shadow and more visible as he started to run to the students, hopping into Sheldon's arms suddenly. Sheldon's face turned pure red while Connor was dripping in sweat, almost enough to drench Sheldon in it.

"Connor?" asked Alex.

Connor breathed deeply before looking at Alex. His eyes now as small as peas and twitching with faint noises.

"Alex… I… The thunder! It's so strong! I couldn't stay in the bathroom any longer!" Connor frantically told Alex.

Alex placed his index finger on Connor's mouth silently. Connor's eyes shrank into peas while it jittered. "Shh," hushed Alex. "Calm down and tell me…" he requested softly.

Connor took a deep breath—probably his first time since kindergarten.

"I was just… scared of the thunder… It was so loud… And it got so d-dark!" Connor explained further. "I swear, I heard footsteps and sweeping from who I think is the janitor… When it suddenly got to a halt!"

The students didn't gasp or anything, but they were evidently shocked and horrified. Judging by their shared faces, it sure is the case.

Connor's later statement didn't make things better. "I also didn't see the janitor after," Connor paused to look around at his classmates, then softly sighed, tilting his head downwards to the ground. "I assume none of you have seen him either…" he said.

"You bet we didn't," Sheldon answered, wearing a frown on his face.

Expectedly, everyone started to gossip and emit some voices out of their crowded space. It was almost claustrophobic being in there! Bruno was really the only exception to this, for even Connor and Casper were talking. All Bruno did was look at his yellow-attired friend, staring around in a panic-like state.

"Everyone! Calm down!" he commanded.

At that instant, everyone stopped, frozen like it was a game of red light, green light. Bruno opened his mouth to say something to Alex about the situation before he held himself away to not cause any further stress for Alex.

"Now, Connor. I know I've already bothered you but—" Alex got stopped suddenly, which isn't uncommon for him, but isn't expected to be done to a class leader. Nonetheless, it did happen. "It's ok!" Connor assured.

"Right…" Alex coughed up. He got back to his position. Keeping his stance up and straight and taking some breaths to make himself look as professional as possible. Presentation is key to convincing others after all. Alex cleared his throat before asking, "Do you remember what exactly happened? Yes, you told us what happened, but I have a sinking feeling that you haven't told the *full* story. Are you?"

Moments of silence came after Alex's questions. Connor stared into the starry, black void that is space. Nothing was in front of him, it seemed.

"Are you?" Alex repeated.

Connor's eyes flickered as he shuddered his head. His body trembled, developing goosebumps. Looking like he just saw a ghost, or is currently in Antarctica, Connor's pupils started to dilate. It previously resembled peas but now they're much more… normal.

"I am…" subtly lied Connor. Bruno could tell. It's obvious. Anyone could've seen behind his classmate's white lie! "Sure…" Alex mumbled, almost sounding disgruntled about the response.

"But!" Connor suddenly belted out. "Perhaps I could give you some… better details…" The short-stance boy had begun to back away from Alex, almost hitting a nearby pill which did actually stop him from reversing even further. Alex proceeded further physically and in-conversation. "So…?" Alex asked.

Connor gulped. Twirling his shirt the same way he did so to his hair (which is probably why it's so much of a curly mess), it had caused him to calm down for a bit. Deep breathing ensued. After 5 rounds of relaxation techniques done by Connor, he finally said something.

"Earlier this morning, last time I saw them, I said I saw them under the stairs, right?" asked Connor, swapping glances from classmate to classmate. Everyone nodded together, as if Connor was a coach giving a pep talk to a sports team. "Well… While I was at the bathroom, I started to remember now. I didn't see them under the

stairs—they were at the gym! I only saw them when I took the stairs though," told Connor.

Everyone's eyes twitched in shock—and perhaps horror. If the gym wasn't already creepy enough, the last time anyone in the class saw them was at the gym, and when at the stairs no less! Contrary to the reactions, this doesn't change the basic point of the previous recalling Connor told: That the teachers went missing in the early morning and were talking to a mysterious man.

"And more over…" continued Connor, looking like he ignored his classmates' panic. "I saw some students who might be witnesses…"

"Who may they be?" Alex asked formally. It honestly seemed like Alex was the only one who kept their cool during this whole ordeal while everyone else either grew bored and tired or restless and always on edge with their fight or flight responses ready to burst out, seeping into their reactions.

"Class 3 members: Mina, Poppy and Ella," Connor answered with unusual confidence. "If you want more potential information, they could provide valuable clues to what happened to the teachers!"

Connor sighed, turning his face away from the students to Alex. "I'm sorry if I didn't help that much…" Connor sighed.

Alex was frozen. Did he not accept Connor's apology? So far, Alex didn't seem to be the type of person to care much about anything. Certainly, this could mean something, wouldn't it?

"Connor…" said Alex breathlessly. "Can you repeat… what you said?"

Connor froze the same way Alex did earlier but took less time to respond. "About what?" he asked. "You said… you told us some specific details earlier?" Alex responded.

The boy lit up with a widened face. He took a massive and audible gulp as he repeated his former statement, "I saw the teachers next to the entrance to the gym, talking to something—"

Connor got suddenly caught off by Alex hastily clapping for a split second. It was almost a jump scare to Connor! "Exactly! That's what I want to hear!" Alex yelled as if he saw a soccer player score the most impressive goal. Before anyone could open their mouth to ask anything, Alex continued, "You saw the teachers talking to someone! You didn't say that before!"

"Oh, I didn't?" Connor questioned with a dumbfounded expression. His body still stuck together like glue. "I'm sorry!" Connor gasped suddenly. He began to dig

his head behind his sweater. “Hey, it’s fine! At least we got to know what was going on!” assured Riley.

Connor smiled at Riley, then at Alex even though he wasn’t smiling at all—rather concerned and frozen more than anything.

Bruno could tell that Connor put a lot of trust into his classmates as much as they did for him. Simple reciprocation, really, but it wasn’t that way back in Brooklyn. Sure is something to be noted about Manhattan—or something about his new school.

Soon enough, chaos came into the gym like a storm reaching a village made of straw huts. The commotion all came from Connor’s statements about the possible whereabouts of the missing teachers. If they were last seen talking to a mysterious man, then it’d be a no-brainer that it’s a red flag of something horrid to succumb later. Especially so with the school’s rumors.

(“Do you really think someone could’ve kidnapped them?”)

(“Of course! What else could’ve happened?”)

(“Alex, if that did happen, then are we next?”)

Amidst the chaos, the person in the middle of it all, Connor, grew to be zoned out. Evident by his pupils shrinking to the size of peas.

Bruno was the first person to notice Connor looking behind the crowd. It seemed like he was gazing at the tall window. The former turned his head back to Alex. Soon enough, Bruno noticed Roselynn turning to Connor—being the only person doing so other than Bruno.

He could barely hear anything more than feinting whispers over the tumultuous herd. Only possibly making out a few words.

“Connor, what seems to be the matter?” asked Roselynn. Bruno could only fill in the blanks of what they said. All that could make sense.

“I see—” Connor’s last word drowned out from the ocean of voices. He could’ve said anything for what anyone would know.

Bruno wishes he could hear more but alas, he couldn’t. In the end, he didn’t really need to, for what would happen soon after.

A loud wail bursts itself out to the wide gym, echoing itself across its empty vacuum. It’s no surprise that everyone instantly gave their attention to Roselynn—and Connor to some extent. Their collective fear transformed into something universes crazier.

“I… I SAW…” Connor stammered.

“Terrance…” shrieked Roselynn under her breath, her voice slightly breaking. “At least… a silhouette of him…”

Bruno was the only one who wasn’t shivering. No flight or fight responses for him activated. He never even heard of this Terrance person they’re speaking of. How would he be scared? Though whatever the guy is associated with or did, must be horrid without any doubt. Nonetheless, Bruno didn’t want to ask questions. Asking uncomfortable questions isn’t for him anymore.

“No way…” Violet silently said. “NO WAY!” she repeated while yelling this time. Riley tipped his arms under Violet, looking like he was tugging her tight. Protecting her from something, perhaps. “It’ll be fine! You’re bluffing, Connor!” accused Riley, his eyes pointing to his named classmate.

“M-Me?!” he stuttered while exclaiming. Roselynn ran to stand in between him and their classmates. “Tch! Connor never lies—neither do I!” Roselynn confidently stated.

Bruno, ignoring the noise going on, looked above just to find something anomalous about the windows which barely anyone saw during the time they were at the gym. Every window in the gym had two parts in each column: one longer and larger window on the bottom and a shorter, smaller window on the top. The window at the top for the window Connor and Roselynn (and briefly Bruno) were looking at was shattered. The only remaining parts of the window were the shards and the outer frames. Everything else became nil!

Shuddering, Bruno turned back to his classmates, them soon enough noticing him. “Bruno?” Sid asked naively. However, Bruno ignored him even if it was the first time he heard Sid talk to him outside the introduction.

“Everyone! The top window is broken!” Bruno yelled, pointing at it.

Despite the window being the smaller one, the size is large enough for an adult to fit through. Everyone gasped together, frightened even more than before.

“We’re good as dead now, Alex!” Bella told Alex straight.

“No. Let’s think about this. A thunderstorm just occurred… sound can break glass easily, especially glass as brittle as this school’s’” Alex kept considering. He couldn’t entirely make heads or tails of this situation, only doing the best he could. “Heck, it could’ve hit the glass. If it was someone who broke it, then how can none of us hear them? How could they even reach the top window if we’re in the middle of the school building?”

All questions were reasonable. It just didn't make sense if it was someone who broke in.

Carly and Sarah, unlike the others during the entire time, kept scoffing at everything. Even at Alex, even when danger was in the question. Though everyone except Bruno (although he wouldn't be surprised if it was true) knew that, if they weren't targets, then they don't care.

"Oh, come on, Alex. This is just getting ridiculous. It's so plainly obvious that there isn't anyone and it's just some stupid thunderstorm scaring all of us into having delusions!" Carly bluntly said. The girls gave a glare for her to remember—though it wasn't as effective as they probably thought. The boys didn't give her any specific expression. Not any if anyone else outside of Class 2 was to describe them.

"I get your point, Carly, but do you really think that it's best if we ignore some danger at hand? While it wouldn't make sense *how* someone would break it, it also doesn't explain how the window *broke*. Chances of lightning striking it are almost in a million, especially in a city as vast as Manhattan. Also, it's unlikely that sound could be so strong to shatter only *one* window. The numbers disprove your points!" responded Alex.

Carly rolled her eyes, and even slightly stuck out her tongue. The sound of numbers grates her ears just as much as forks squeaking on a plate.

Sarah, meanwhile, looked like she agreed with Alex for once. She stared at her friend in concern, then at Alex. She slowly nodded to what Alex said but tried to hide it the best she could from Carly.

Bruno noticed what was going on. "You're kidding, right?" Bruno suddenly asked Carly with an impulsive mind. "We could be good as dead, and you would just shrug it off and blame it on someone else if we listen to you!"

Carly gasped, then pouted so much, she came straight out of a cartoon. Her cheeks are red like cherries and tomatoes. "How dare you—"

She got cut off by Sarah.

"Oh, Carly! Calm down! Let's listen to them for once."

"We could be in *serious* danger for all we know!" advised Sarah. Carly gave an urgent look to Sarah, which didn't actually intimidate her. "Fine," she reluctantly said, agreeing with her friend.

Bruno smiled brightly at the girls while Alex still wore a frown on his face. What would come after is probably something awful if the girls commented on anything.

Chapter 7
Escapism

Everyone was still dazed by the sudden sighting. Their minds scrambled in questions. *Were Connor and Roselynn seeing things or were their minds correct?* Unlike the others, Alex was determined to open his mind up to further possibilities of what could've happened. At this point, the teachers definitely had something disastrous, monstrous has happened to them.

"Connor, Roselynn…" Alex suddenly called.

Connor was visibly shaken while Roselynn was the complete opposite. Her current deposition was confirmed by her relaxing eyes and lax arms. "What?" Roselynn asked to cover for Connor's anxious stuttering.

Alex inched closer to the two, who were both fairly physically close but not as much as other classmates were close to each other at the time.

"What did you two see?" asked Alex. "You said you saw Terrance, yes?"

Connor nodded slowly, avoiding ever wanting to say that name again. It felt like a curse for some people in the school. Contrary to Connor, however, Roselynn said something instead of a nodding silence.

"Not *entirely*," Roselynn affirmed. Alex raised an eyebrow while everyone else's curiosity peaked. "We only saw a silhouette of the man. It could've been anyone for all we knew," she added.

"Exactly! That's why I asked! You only saw a silhouette!" Alex exclaimed.

Alex turned himself to his classmates—his subordinates. It was obvious he was going to hand out an inspirational speech. His eyes blazed at everyone with passion for his theories. It almost looked like he had dealt with this many times before!

"How can we say that we are being attacked by Terrance? I know I might look like I'm in denial. I can't deny that I am. That's one thing I can say with certainty," Alex paused to think after saying. "But you also can't deny that we should be careful of what we hear from others. Yes, Terrance might be here. Yes, we might be in danger. Yes, the teacher is missing probably because of Terrance, but can we really say that *we* will? With all the other staff and students around with strength in numbers?" "I must say that we must calm down at the minimum. Panicking will

make the situation worse. If we panic, then we won't come up with any plans. We will be so clouded by our racing thoughts that we won't even have the energy to walk! If we calm down, then we can work together and stop fighting. We can be as strong as we always strive to be as a united class."

Everyone's faces switches to subtle joy. Hope has arrived to them through their leader's words. Perhaps the class (and Zina) wasn't making a mistake in letting Alex lead! Despite his short stance and exhibition of odd behaviors, he has the adequate brain power to problem solve—perhaps leadership is no big deal for them after all.

Bruno sadly broke the silent happiness buzzing in the room by raising his hand. "Alex?" Bruno asked, echoing the gym due to the silent vacuum surrounding everyone.

"Yes?" Alex prompted.

"I don't know if any of you mind me asking but… Who even *is* Terrance? I keep hearing about him," asked Bruno.

The students seemed neutrally terrified… Somewhat less terrified than before. Just hearing the name "Terrance" feels like a cursed spell is being said out loud. Bruno gulped, wanting to say, 'So you *do* mind…' but he declined himself to say anything as it might make his classmates more uncomfortable.

"Ah, it's fine," Alex assured soon after.

Alex shot looks at his peers to confirm if he could do the explaining alone. He knew that the topic might be harsh (to say the least) for them.

"To put it simply: Terrance is… a man of bad legends around these corners. Granted, he *is* real, but he never did anything in the school," explained Alex, wanting to avoid any details.

"He never did anything!?" objected Carly. "He certainly did something!"

"What do you mean?" Alex asked, almost looking oblivious to some crimes. Bruno didn't know, as expected. He never knew anything about the school to begin with, why would he with the history? "How about Zina? I heard she was murdered by Terrance!" Roselynn said. "It was horrific, I daresay!" whined Isabella while adding.

Alex stared at Nadia, then traced his pupils away from her and everyone else, looking above. "Wasn't she… murdered by someone else?" Alex asked. "I'm her best friend… I should know full well from her family…" Mandy joked, "Maybe even lover."

Bruno kept blinking while Alex had his teeth stuck together like glue. His eyes shrunk to the size of buttons. “I’m… I’m not her lover!” he almost tripped off by denying. Everyone giggled in unison, even Bruno smirked slightly.

“Ok, ok, so… Now can,” Bruno stopped to chuckle. “Now can you lot explain to me things about him?” he asked soon after.

Spencer led out a sigh. “Alex was correct about one thing: No murders were connected to the school. He was simply a serial killer around New York—a notorious one that everyone fears even when he disappeared. As for Zina, I’m not sure about her… Nobody is,” Spencer squinted his eyes while answering.

“That’s what I heard my parents say,” Bruno responded.

“Oh, but don’t be mistaken! Terrance is still dangerous,” Roselynn added.

“Thank mother he is, or was, missing,” Renard added. “We’d all be toast by now if he’s here!” he chuckled soon after. Max grunted with some spark in his voice after he spoke, “Renard! That’s no funny business!” “Khe khe khe!” Renard chuckled.

Bruno stared at the boys, thinking that they’re crazy. They’re not so different from the other students, yet they feel odd, mainly because they’re joking about what seems to be murders of their former schoolmates.

“Terrance is a real baddie ya have to watch yer tails for!” Winnie suddenly said, grasping Bruno by the shoulder, her right pigtail almost hitting his cheek. “It’s more like she has to watch *her* tail,” Bruno thought. “He doesn’t only kill kids, but it’s rumored he worships the devil too! At least at some point!” Winnie added. Roselynn nodded softly. “He did!”

Connor grew white and turned to ice. His eyes looking like it got frozen in time just like him.

“Connor?” Casper asked. After, he sweeps his palms a couple inches from Connor’s eyesight to wake him up.

“Connor?” he repeated.

The students noticed, raising their eyebrows physically and metaphorically.

“What happened?” Alex asked.

“I think he got shocked from the mention of Terrance,” Roselynn explained. She sighed, then said, “I think he really believes it was Terrance, who him and I saw.” “I won’t lie… I believe so too,” she admits.

“Do you think he’s watching us…?” Casper asked. He took a frightening turn to look at his frozen friend. “Does *Connor* think so…?” he asked again, now in a true shuttering voice.

“I don’t know anymore… I wasn’t expecting this out of the first day. I thought we’d be introducing each other and now we might die! I should’ve listened to my parents! I should’ve sounded the alarms in my head since I heard the rumors back in Brooklyn!” Bruno suddenly burst out, almost wanting to cry.

Alex ignored the cries of his new seat partner in favor for something else…

“Sound the alarms?” thought Alex out loud.

Alex looked at the other side of the gym. It was a medium-sized red alarm, round and shaped like a frisbee. It was to the left of the bathroom doors, nearly reaching half of the door frame. The alarm was fairly shiny, so it was easy for Alex to spot it. “A-ha!” he snapped his fingers.

“Riley, Sheldon, Casper, can you bring me up to that alarm bell?” he asked, turning to the boys. The three boys he listed were either athletic or tall, perfect for his plan. They nodded in agreement and ran to the bottom of the alarm. Everyone stared with a blank expression, almost wanting to walk towards them but worried that the tower that the boys soon enough formed would tumble and fall on them. It didn’t seem to be the most stable tower, after all. “As expected…” sighed Alex. “At least we tried, Alex. That’s what matters!” Sheldon assured him with an optimistic smile. Alex was the contrary. He had a melancholic expression on his face, one that would suggest a gloomy future that might come forward.

Above them all, the students collectively stared at the red and shiny alarm bell. It was the moon to the gym’s grassy field. Casper sneezed before he said, “I won’t blame anyone here for giving up… The alarm is so high!” “Agreed! Only Mother knows how any of the teachers could get up there!” exclaimed Winnie, looking at Casper without the latter looking back.

“Perhaps teachers that would be athletic enough, such as the sparring teachers, both whom we haven’t even *found* yet. All we’ve been really doing is… getting scared!” Roselynn said.

“Roselynn, aren’t you the student who got scared by a shadow you saw through a window?” Riley asked with obvious snark. Roselynn bit her mouth, the same way she figuratively bit her tongue.

“Okay, enough with the snark! Let’s… Let’s come up with something else. Something that doesn’t acquire electricity,” stated Alex. He was approaching the hazy window, covered by the fog on the outside and water droplets from the condensation in the atmosphere falling on the glass. Alex’s breath while speaking exchanged into the glass, looking like the mist that made everyone blind from seeing outside. The heavy rain was another factor into why the window was so wet, and so was the fear instilled in everyone… Including Alex, who flinched after a thunder strike.

Everyone exchanged glances at each other. Some shrugging. Bruno looks at the clock, as he always does at school. He then looked across the room to examine the timetable. The letters and numbers were visible enough for him to make out when was the next lesson due.

“Five more minutes out of fifty? Have we really wasted that much time? Actually, it felt like it’s been longer…” Bruno thought to himself.

Indeed, it had only been forty-five minutes when it felt like two hours. Maybe eternity to students like Sheldon and Bruno who never had the concept of time!

Bruno turned to look at his puzzled classmates. He wished to tell them anything, but then he thought about it. “It’s only five minutes. They can take the hint themselves. There’s no need to make a big fuss about it! It’s only five minutes,” he kept thinking. “But assuring them that the bell will ring soon is going to give them hope… won’t it?” he thought again. At that point, Bruno was a ball of irrational thoughts, intertwined into a boy with a blue baseball cap and a red backpack. This was not the only instance of his irrational thoughts, for, when he was in Brooklyn, he used to have the worst thoughts about failing up relationships with his friends. While that case didn’t turn out well, most instances of his racing thoughts are pointless. He’s also infamous for making a big deal out of things. If Bella wasn’t already known in the school for being a drama queen, then Bruno would be the well-known drama king!

He didn’t get a moment of relief. The only things he felt were his thoughts eating him up and his class leader’s banging leather shoes approaching him. “Bruno—” Alex was stopped by a familiar, yet hopeful noise.

“RING-A-RING-A-RING!” the nearest bell screamed.

Everyone's hearts were pounding, almost out loud. At least everyone could each other's pumping hearts. Alex sighed roughly, knowing that the bell could stop a potential conversation. Bruno could also see that Alex was… hiding something. What he was going to say was something he was hiding.

"Alex?" Bruno asked, snapping out of being in an anxiety-ruled state. He stood up from his previous leg crossing position. Alex's eyes widened; the pupils ran to the upper right side of the retina. "What?" Alex asked, now with a hoarser voice than usual.

Bruno gaped his mouth before shutting it again, the same way Alex did except without a sigh. "Nothing. I was just… I saw you approaching me?" Bruno soon asked, sweating, having the urge to pull the left shoulder of his shirt. "I was just going to tell you about the bell, that's all," said Alex. It was bluntly clear that Alex was lying, but Bruno let it slip anyways. He didn't want an already blossoming relationship to end so early in such a way.

"Well, everyone, you know what this means!" Alex suddenly said upon looking away from Bruno, turning his confident voice back. To Bruno, this is a supposed persona that he now recognizes to be a front for Alex. It's understandable that he wants to be a true leader, but he also questions why would anyone in the class let an actually awkward "nerd" become leader? Why would the previous leader, Zina, especially? The only good trait he could think of for Alex is his intelligence. "Our chances have grown exponentially higher! Bang the doors as loud as any of you can! It's an order," Alex ordered everyone.

Bruno flinched slightly at Alex's sudden order of door banging. Everyone else easily obliged, especially Riley who has gone extremely rowdy during the period. Bruno hasn't, though he has never been the obedient type either.

As Alex ordered, some students ran to the main door to the gym. Everyone else were either attempting to sound the alarms to get through the window, although it's already known that someone lurks there. Really, it was only Bruno who didn't do anything.

Alex took notice of that.

"Bruno?" he asked. Bruno didn't wait for another sentence, let alone question. "Why do we have to bang the doors? I mean, a teacher would try to walk into the gym anyways. Who knows? Maybe even the sparring teachers themselves would," Bruno told Alex.

Alex coughed, sounding like he was going to make a sarcastic statement. “And what if they won’t? It’s for the better of us to try to get the attention of everyone at school other than waiting for them to come when it isn’t guaranteed. According to my calculations, there is less than forty-five percent chance that the teachers would even be coming.” He added in after a deep breath, “It’s not like I’m forcing everyone to do what I say anyways… I’m… Really not good at authority.”

Bruno’s face grew sympathetic to Alex, though he didn’t know why. Such a strange feeling indeed.

“Sorry. I’m just new here,” apologized Bruno, while excusing at the same time. “I understand, even if I was in the school since first grade,” said Alex. “But being from Hawaii can get that to me, I guess…”

Bruno raised an eyebrow at the last statement. It was a discovery that did change things, even if it’s little.

“You’re… from Hawaii? Huh! Thought I was weird for being out of Manhattan!” Bruno chuckled.

Alex scoffed, strangely enough. It seemed so warm to Bruno, yet different to Alex. “A lot of students in this school aren’t from here. Oh, including those pink and purple nitwits,” Alex said quickly to brush over the mention of names. Bruno already knew who he was talking about (Aster and Blossom). He didn’t want to say the names and ask any further questions however, for he already knew his leader had already had distressful situations with the duo. “It’ll be ok, Alex!” Bruno assured. He admittedly didn’t exactly know what was going on or what Alex was talking about at that point (expectedly), but he knew he had a new friend in his hands and wanted to comfort him.

Meanwhile, their classmates kept thrusting on the doors. At that point, it looked like they were going to break them out instead of the teachers.

Luckily, the latter might occur because of a teacher by the name of George Baker, nicknamed Munz (pronounced munch by some students, but it’s actually like months) for his insatiable diet, which is ironic as he’s the cooking teacher.

He was large, both in width and height. His hair was blonde with protruding strands going perfectly on his head, as if it’s the top part of a sphere puzzle. While he wore a white and black suit and tie, he had the most casual navy-blue jeans, and pockets stuffed with (what is believed to be) candy.

This was the first time Bruno would see him, and it was through the fuzzy view of a faraway window.

No matter how far students were, however, it was obvious that he was the one who would spot them first, despite it looking like he was caught in storm wholly different than Class 2's. Bella led out hand signals along with Nadia. Both were excellent in hand gestures, probably because it was needed for many of the former's drama skits and auditions.

Surprisingly, Munz could tell what the signals meant. Well, for what felt like a minute at least. He walked away from the sight of the teens, leaving them stranded once again. They collectively sighed in disbelief.

"We sure are unlucky. The first teacher we find and it's Mr. I Eat So Much I Can't Think!" Maverick joked. Mandy nodded while the other students ignored his harsh joke, even if it's based on truth. Bruno stared at the door as his classmates began to move away from it. As opposed to them, he walked towards it. It was clear that they had given up. It was like they've been "ding-dong-ditched" by a couple of neighborhood kids. "How could a teacher even leave us like this though?" Bruno asked, wanting it to be a thought but accidentally said it out loud. Because of that, he covered his mouth slightly. Maverick, who was beside him shrugged.

Maverick took a sudden close look at Bruno. He squinted his eyes, then opened them wide. It was like a balloon being deflated then inflated in front of Bruno. It seemed as if he was examining how Bruno really looks like. Really, none of Bruno's classmates got as close as Maverick did at that moment (other than Alex and maybe Nadia).

Maverick saw Bruno's freckles, skin akin to a Spaniard, and brown hair as short and fuzzy as a true everyday boy would have. Not to mention his clothing options.

Maverick snickered. "Wow, everyone sure is right about you being plain!" he suddenly insulted. Bruno was surprised Maverick didn't comment on his scent. It wasn't anything special, but he might've smelled like waffles and butter. "What do you mean by that?" Bruno asked. Maverick ignored the question and instantly added more to what he was saying earlier. "And your accent. If I remember correctly, you're from Brooklyn! I mean, how could you *not* be? Your accent gives it away!" said Maverick.

Bruno paused and continuously blinked. Bruno had never heard someone comment on his accent, so it was a surprise for sure. Perhaps it's because he lived his whole life in Brooklyn before the past few days.

"I thought *you* were from Brooklyn…" Bruno said, with a temptation for whimpering in him.

"My *cousin* is. It's easy to mix us up, really. You could say we're twins!" Maverick laughed.

"He looks like his grandpa, that's how," Mandy suddenly joined in, her strange black eyes pointing to Maverick.

Bruno continued to be quiet. He was never truly good at conversations with classmates—let alone one about his appearance and especially his speech. All this time, Bruno, Maverick and Mandy were behind the door that should've taken them out of the gym at this point. Strangely enough, there were still students banging on the windows, holding hope that it might help.

Suddenly…

Munz comes in!

"Munz!" everyone exclaimed in unison.

Munz didn't say anything, probably because he was behind a solid door and only a tough enough window for sound to get stuck through.

Knowing this, Munz held up a picture of a key. It was a normal, silver key, no additional chain, only a gray ring around where it should usually be. After, the teacher shook his head and waved his index finger left to right, indicating that there was no key currently available.

"Pain's grin!? No key?!" Riley yelled in urgency. He banged harshly on the door. It might as well have crumbled to bits at that point. His groan could also be loud enough to break the glass in front of him.

Munz shrugged, holding a strong frown on his face. He took more looks before suddenly…

Bang!

Cling, tinkle, cling.

Everyone, even Munz behind the thick window, could hear it.

It was the sound of breaking glass!

It came from the opposite side of everyone crowding the door.

They all collectively turned their backs, Munz's eyes shrunk.

They saw only one person who was *still* at the window. Violet.

"Violet!?" everyone exclaimed together.

They saw the window in front of her, shattered in the bottom half of the long, vertical window. She turned red as a tomato. Her smile was as stable as a standing wooden stick.

"Oops!" she exclaimed, unaware of what her action could mean, caused by her clouded anxiety of everyone suddenly looking behind to see her.

"Violet! You're mad! You actually broke the glass!" Riley laughed in relief.

Violet blushed even further than before. It was clear as day that this wasn't embarrassment she was blushing over. It was from being complimented by her crush!

Riley rushed to her, faster than everyone else behind him. He hugged Violet tightly while the others gathered up to the window, breathing the fresh air they so long for.

"And this is why we shouldn't give up on other options," Alex stated, trying his best to sound like a wise advisor to his classmates. Nobody listened.

Sheldon poked his head out of the shattered window. Only seeing shards down a steel-textured floor.

"Alex, who do you think should go first?" Sheldon asked.

"Well, it's obvious! Violet and Riley shall go first. You will go after them. The rest of you I will tell," answered Alex.

Sheldon nodded. As Alex told them to, Violet and Riley jumped out of the window, holding hands. Some would say tightly as Riley hugged Violet!

When it was Bruno's turn, he turned to look down. At first, he was worried about the height of the fall. Bruno isn't good at falling far distances. It turns out that the height was barely an issue! There was a base that had no fences to its right, since it was leading to a descending staircase to the ground. The stairs were fairly long as the gym was on the third floor. Bruno didn't mind, as expected.

Bruno hopped from the window. He felt the warmness of the floor, even when walking down the stairs, even through the daze from the rain.

At the end of the stairs, he meets his other classmates who escaped before him. Roughly ten. “Wasn’t that exhilarating?” Nadia asked Bruno happily. Bruno nodded. No words were needed to express how relieved he felt. Soon enough, everyone’s toes touched the grassy floor. The breeze felt like a gust of velvet, flowing through their hair. As cold as it may be, it was, without any doubt, better than the gym’s air conditioner.

Some time passed before Alex rushed to the front of the crowd that everybody formed. While his arms were tight to his hips, he tipped his toes over to make himself taller. Perhaps to seem like a menacing and commanding leader.

“Attention everyone!” Alex called.

His classmates followed the order to a tee. Without Alex saying anything, they formed a line. Bruno was confused, as expected. In the Brooklyn branch of the school, class leaders only ever acted as hall monitors, never commanding leaders like Alex. He luckily got to the back of the long line at last.

“Follow me. We *might* be at stake here, considering the fact that there might be a murderer on the loose,” ordered Alex under his breath. It didn’t take long until Alex noticed some of the girls growing tense. Carly was truly the only one not afraid—but she isn’t afraid of anything if it doesn’t involve her directly. “Don’t worry. If we stick together, then I guarantee we will be ok,” Alex said.

Without anyone saying anything after, they all followed Alex who led them to the emergency door to the first floor. The emergency area was tall, for the first floor stairs to third floor are present. It was so tall; Bruno couldn’t see it without his jaw opening. The bottom part of the area was painted a pale gray, it could almost blend in with the white that the rest of the wall is painted with. Opposite the door that the class went through was the door to the first floor itself.

“Alex, do you really think it’d the best idea to go through first graders in a single line as a collective class?” Max asked, almost sounding sarcastic. Alex cleared his throat, then asked back, “Do you have a better idea?” Max swallowed his throat. Gulping as loud enough that most could hear it. “Look, I’m just saying that because, well, we’re supposed to be in class and… Teachers who are here might think we’re sneaking out of class together,” he further explained his logic.

“I can’t see your logic. It’s not normal for an entire class to escape together, let alone with their class leader,” replied Alex. He said so while pausing the walk.

“That is a good point…” Max sighed.

Alex continued to walk through the door. Maverick snickered. Bruno could tell that Maverick pushed himself closer to Mandy, to whisper "Bet he's embarrassed to walk past babies with his classmates." Mandy giggled. "This is no time for jokes, you two," Alex raised his voice. Maverick's face melted into a grim look, or a comically looking one. Mandy tried to hold back her laughter the best she could, though Bruno, who was behind Mandy, could not see the comedy.

Bruno could finally see the first floor in full. Earlier that day, he had to pass "the senior's route," that had to be partaken in the school grounds instead of the school gate to hall that the junior students have. Unlike the other floors, the first floor has colorful drawings that look to be drawn by children. There were also papers that consisted of drawings that first graders made—even older ones! There was an entire board dedicated to former first graders' drawings. Bruno could tell, more of so by seeing Bella flinch at one of them, than the fact that it wrote "Senior First Graders!" at the top of the board. Bruno could even hear Nadia ask, "Wow, you used to be an artist?" Despite being muffled by the chattering of first and second graders, Bella could be heard spouting "Oh shush it!"

Bruno looked right to left. Left to right. He saw all the classes. They were strangely labeled the same as his classes (Class 1, 2, 3 and 4). He wondered if every grade was the same in terms of naming schemes for the classes. Before he could ask it, Mandy somehow answered the question for him. "Ah, they're named Classes 11, 12, 13 and 14, you see! We're technically Class 102!" Bruno visibly blinked. Despite that, Mandy kept her mouth shut and turned her head quickly.

Alex was about to walk forward until…

A bunch of first and second graders run to the halls!

"What the!?" Riley exclaimed.

"Oh right! They must've got out of the cafeteria!" Spencer explained swiftly.

Before Alex could force himself to the stairs and have the speed of lightning, he got struck the same way by hitting a teacher! His gasp was audible as the vicious look on the teacher's face. There was no mistaking it—The teacher is Shawn Diggs, or rather, Shawn!

"Mr. S-Shawn!" Alex stammered. "Ah, Alex… My *exceptional* student. What are you doing here, sneaking with your class?" Shawn asked while raising his left eyebrow. Alex gulped. His mouth full of uncomprehensible words seems to have

stopped functioning as his classmates gulped the same way he did… Well, the ones from the beginning.

"Hot diggity—We thought you left the school!" Winnie exclaimed, swallowing an extra word.

"Oh, you did? You thought becoming homeroom teacher of Class 2 is resigning?" Shawn asked.

The students who were in Class 2 from the start gasped even louder. "No way! You took over Mr. Mustard!?" Roselynn shouted. "That is a crime! A crime I must say!" cried Bella.

"Who… Are you?" Bruno asked, his voice prevailing over everyone else's, purely because he's the newest student out of everyone. Shawn noticed of course. At this point of the day, Bruno was the talk of the school—and it was only his first day! "Why, new boy… I'm Mr. Shawn. The math teacher of your precious classmates for the first and second grades… Now homeroom teacher of your supposed class! You should've seen how little they've changed from their old ways. I was the one who disciplined them. I guess I didn't change either if I have say so myself…" said Shawn. At the end, he was ominously cleaning up his tie and straightening it.

Alex's pupils grew to the size of peas. Alex is a Master of Mathematics. If he's intimidated by his former math teacher, then it's no surprise that everyone else is either. It's also no surprise that Alex is so afraid for what Max warned what would happen *did* happen—that he'd be caught for an unintentional crime.

"I expected better of you all. Oh well," Shawn shrugged.

The students immediately could tell what was going on—even Bruno and Casper, the newest students.

Together, without even exchanging looks, rushed for their lives past Shawn. Some could even feel the teacher spinning like a sign being passed by a speeding car. Shawn could soon be heard whistling. Nobody knew what this could mean. He couldn't have been so cruel that he'd call his students—who he should treat as if they're his children—as if they're a pack of dogs.

Yet, what they believed was proven false ever so quickly.

Bruno was the first to look behind since he heard a million footsteps chasing him. It was a herd of second-grade students he was the homeroom teacher of! Bruno yelped. It was loud enough to be heard by his classmates, who all looked behind.

“OH NO!” they all screamed.

It was an understatement to say that it caused a commotion to the rest of the floor, now the classes containing third and fourth graders. Third graders that also included Bruno’s brother, Antonio Ray. Everyone from those grades stared out of their doors and looked at all the tenth graders comically running from second years. All laughed except for Antonio, who gasped. “Bruno!” he called.

Bruno rushed past Class 4 (or 34) that was his brother’s. However, he could hear the faint call of his brother, loud enough that it caught his attention. Luckily so too. “Antonio!” he cried.

He dashed to his brother’s classroom, which both excited and surprised the students. The teacher, who was a blonde-almost white-haired lady, approached Bruno. “What’s going on!?” she exclaimed. Bruno took heavy breaths. Before, he couldn’t stop inhaling and exhaling, panting and sweating.

“My classmates! Being chased by second graders because Shawn asked them to—or whatever his name is!” Bruno quickly told the teacher and the other students. He felt like he could only tell them in small bits, yet it did make sense for them. “Oh dear! Not Shawn!” the teacher cried. “He’s crazy… I’m glad we got out of his control,” a student commented.

Antonio smiled at his brother, catching Bruno’s attention. “We’ll help! Since we’re third graders, we can convince the second graders to stop!” Antonio told Bruno. Bruno had a wider smile than his brother, still warm. “Thanks. I never expected you to do anything out of causing trouble,” Bruno chuckled.

Antonio stood up, as he was crouching down to talk to his laying down brother, and commanded his classmates to run out and block the way to the third floor after all of Class 2 goes (with the teacher’s permission of course). After understanding, everyone runs outside, catching the other third grader’s attention. Before that, the second graders did actually fight with the tenth graders (though the latter slowly won by a longshot).

The Class 2 students stared blankly at the third graders. Bruno came in time to explain what’s going on briefly. By then, the tenth graders collectively ran to the third floor without any trouble from Shawn, who wasn’t paying attention anymore. It seemed he had put in too much trust in seven-year-olds to say anything.

The Class 2 students were laughing when they reached the target floor, which was theirs. Escaping prison is what they all felt like they've just been through—from escaping the gym to escaping children.

"We did it! We actually did it!" Sheldon cheered, who soon hugged Riley.

"I told you we could do it," told Alex.

They all giggled over that until…

Sounds of what seems to be steps started to come forward. At first, they thought it was Munz, whose steps were loud enough to cause indoor earthquakes.

Chapter 8
The Bullies

And eventually, it did! It was Munz marching to the students like an old father approaching his children.

"Children! Oh my! Are you all ok?" Munz asked. Nobody said anything, let alone responded. "Oh, I'm so sorry for not doing anything quicker! I swear to mother, I didn't see any key," apologized Munz, continuing with the last sentence. His voice was fragile, yet so deep that it could be mistaken for a bear's growl whenever he yawns. "For the record: We're *not* children, Mr. Baker," corrected Riley. He had the most angered face out of everyone, definitely because he was the most passionate about leaving the gym. There's no doubt that he developed a grudge against Munz. So much so that he ignored Munz's apologies!

Meanwhile, the other students shared faces of concern, mixed with confusion. "How come there's no key to the gym anyways?" Sheldon asked. "How could it even be locked by itself in the first place!?" exclaimed Roselynn. Munz, while those questions were asked below his face, had his pupils roll to the right-hand upper corner. Munz, while calling him chubby is an understatement, is still an honest and caring teacher. He's so honest and trustworthy, that he was made "Head of Floor 3" Would someone with a title such as that lie to teens who are desperate to know?

"I don't have a clue. I don't think the other staff knows either." Munz said with a huff. The other students stared at him enthusiastically, all below him.

"Well, this is what we do know: The Lanes are definitely missing," said Alex while making out a box with his hands, shuffling it around the teacher's eyes, which amused him. Max pushed the surrounding students away from Alex, grunting as he did so. "Affirmative! If they were here, they'd be looking for us as soon as came!" His smile amused Munz more than anyone expected.

What made the moment more intriguing was the homeroom teacher herself, Garcia, rushing in to find her, "Students! My children!" She cried out those words while her students watched, collectively saying nothing. Furthermore, due to some reflection, tears could be made out from Garcia's eyes.

Soon enough, the other homeroom teachers arrived to the scene, those being Mrs. Delilah Lightful, Mr. Mando Bush, and Mr. Barley Yuri. The former two panted while the latter was fit and thin enough to handle the constant running for the gym-stuck teenagers.

"Oh, there you are darlings!" Delilah grinned. It contrasted strangely with Garcia's melancholy. "Was everyone lookin' for us?" asked Winnie, turning her torso to search for other staff members. Nobody else was there. Mando, as bored and tired as usual, coughed up, "It's our duty."

Like with Munz, the students didn't show any impressed faces to Class 3's teacher. Instead, they copied his face. "Oh. There was an obligation. Of course," Spencer groaned, as if it's something obvious. Bruno was the only light shining the sea of dull frowning. "It's fine!" he assured. "At least *some* staff cared about our disappearance."

Garcia gasped with a blast. "*Some*? I told everyone! They all cared, equally… Except for the Lanes. They're absent."

So even the teachers didn't know what happened to the missing sparring coaches. Even they assumed they were absent. Reasonable enough for them, considering the fact it wasn't their job finding out what happened to their co-workers. Either that, or the principal, Mr. Dunkel, told them to keep quiet. That thought got eaten up in Bruno's mind. If that was true, then Isabella could be right about him exiling the brothers.

"We were searching for them. Well, about to." A cough interrupted Alex, making him sound sarcastic.

"What happened anyways?" Garcia asked with deep concern.

Carly gave attention to herself by cackling a bit then brushing her hair with her hands. "You see, mother, we got into the ragged gym, but we didn't find the teachers. Everyone panicked, except for me!" The last part clearly offended Sarah, making her noticeably scoff. It seemed Carly also included her partner-in-crime in the list of panicking students. "Finally, we got out… Somehow. Without that silly Baking teacher's help, of course," she slightly pointed at Munz, who blushed. Violet went scarlet the same way as the wide teacher. Truly, she was the one who broke the pupils free. Shouldn't it be her who gets the credit?

Garcia was shaken, tempered at the same time too. "Carly!" she snapped. "Never mind. I guess some parts do sound like the truth."

Connor’s puppy eyes met Garcia. His mouth jiggled around in fear as he asked, “Are we in trouble?” The stutters made out didn’t improve things for Garcia’s feelings. “What? No way!” she instantly denied. What relieved everyone more were the other teachers intervening.

“None of this is your fault’s. It’s nobody’s,” Delilah stated. “But now you've got some education to pass through. While we hate to say it: It's extremely necessary for you all. And that includes waiting for your next teachers,” Barley advised, somewhat continuing Delilah.

Nobody flinched, only Bruno. The term teachers stunned Bruno. He didn’t know if this implied multiple teachers are arriving for a single lesson or if everyone’s going to be separated. “Teachers?” he gulped. “Yes. The class's next subject is Music. Since you don't know Bruno, the main teacher, Ludwig Octavia, has an assistant, Louise,” Garcia explained.

Bruno sighed deeply with relief. He much preferred spending the entire day with the peers he began warming up to rather than separated from their quirky interactions.

“He's an alumnus of the school and has always been loyal to Mr. Flax!” Delilah smiled, matching her bright surname. Garcia got closer to Delilah, though moving backwards. “That extends to Octavia,” she added.

Bruno led out a subtle “oh” His facial structure stretched ever so slightly once he heard Isabella whisper into his eardrums, “We like to call him Mr. Quaver.” “Like the note?” Bruno asked, not silenced like his classmate. Called out it wasn’t, though. Instead, Bella simply nodded. “Interesting,” whistled Bruno to himself.

Munz soon stood in front of everyone, towering over everyone, maybe even forming a shadow on some. He was so wide, the entire first row of students darkened. “You heard what Professor Barley said!” he roared, almost causing an earthquake.

Other students were left dazed by what just happened, with the exception of the vigor in Alex. “Yes. You all! Get back to class, take a break around here, or get your books until Octavia and Louise arrive!” the nerdy leader commanded, standing beside Munz, somehow sounding more dominant than the teacher. His peers nodded in unison, like a school of fishes moving at once. And like it, they disperse to either the wall-adjacent lockers, locker room or Class 2.

Bruno was awkwardly the only one standing, along with Alex. He approached his leader, saying “I'll just go and get my stuff from the lockers.” Paralyzing himself

after hearing that, Alex stared and asked, “You mean, you ordered to get a locker… When you could’ve easily had your books in your huge bag that you have on all the time?”

Bruno had a jolly chuckle. “Oh, the bag’s not that big! And it can’t really hold a bunch of books without getting it heavy. I just can’t carry it.”

Alex blinked at the crazy teen. “Whatever,” he snapped while barrel-rolling his pupils.

Raring to go, Bruno reached the locker room in no time. As expected, there was a whole collection of silver doors, storing many objects, valuable to each student in ownership.

After a few minutes of looking around curiously, Bruno forgot that he entered for a reason. “Right!” he exclaimed to himself. His bag twirled around his body, descending to the wooden-textured floor. A bang could be heard by its pure weight. It was a miracle Bruno could even survive the day carrying it around. “The key…” he kept reminding himself.

Examining it resulted in nothing, however. “Where did I keep it?” he wondered in frustration. The entire time, he was fearful of a student walking in while he looked foolish searching for a key when it could be right under his nose. And it was. Being found in the side pocket was a true testament of his memory, and his face’s ability to keep cool.

Phew, he sighed in relief. Zipping his bag, he tucked it behind him as usual. He inspected the key further. It had a label saying “21” Of course, it indicated which locker it could open. “Locker twenty-one…” whispered Bruno to himself. After a while dashing to find it, he found the locker. It was just like him. Fitting into a mold like all the others.

He opened it. As bargained for, the locker was quiet and spatial enough to hold stacks of books, and possibly all of Bruno’s cloned baseball caps. Well and done with it, the door was about to close before…

Slam!

Bruno felt a sudden surge of shock as he felt his own skin smashing against what was thought to be a wall. However, it wasn’t. Instead, after doing a push-up from it, he found it was the locker he just packed everything in. Nothing was processed yet.

Cackling could be heard shortly after. Clearly, at that point, Bruno didn't pull on his clumsy switch and tripped. For sure, it had to be a jerk—and it was!

"Hey! This isn't funny, Car—"

Bruno bit his own tongue for a split second as he spun himself around and found…

"Aster? Blossom?" he questioned, blinking.

Nobody said anything though, only roars of giggling from the troublemakers. Opposing them was the enraged Bruno, or at minimum unimpressed. "What are you two doing here?" sounding clearly lost as he asked so.

Blossom opened her eyes, which were shut off the entire length of her laughter—same goes for Aster. She had the largest smug smile on her face that Bruno had ever seen.

"We were getting our books from the locker," she said, almost sounding proud of what she predicts will be said next by her partner-in-crime. "Then we found you! The silly newbie," Aster continued.

While they were speaking, Bruno investigated the ways to escape the duo. To no avail did he find any. He was circled well. So, instead of instigating a worse fight, his mind decided to play along or at least react as things go on. That's his life's philosophy anyhow.

"I am *not* a silly newbie. Haven't you heard what my class has just been through?" Bruno sternly said. Anticipating a huge speech arrived a simple "Sure" from Aster. Unapologetic and apathetic as ever.

Bruno scoffed. "They're all roaming around because nobody was around to help! Nobody, like you and your classmates!" His irises gestured and pointed at the two of them, emphasizing the fact that he's referring to both—and *definitely* both.

"As if we could. We were both in the middle of stupid biology classes for God's sake!" Aster hissed.

For a moment in the background, Blossom flopped her face, unimpressed at Aster's absent knowledge of her schedule. "I was studying chemistry…" she swiftly corrected. "Whatever! The point is: We were actually working while your class were swimming around doing nothing," dismissed Aster

"Nothing?! We were investigating. Heck, even doing some sports," Bruno snapped back.

"My classmates and I would've solved what happened to the teacher way before your class."

“Wanna bet?”

“Why would I? You already know who'll win. But I should’ve expected that since you're from Brooklyn,” Aster teased, circling around Bruno while began to repel away from the locker. His face contrasted that of his bully’s malicious grin.

“What does that have to do with anything?!” shouted Bruno. His head rose so quickly, his hat almost fell off. Blossom joined Aster’s side, soon scoffing and saying, “Everyone knows that everyone in Brooklyn is a criminal who are awful gamblers.”

The stereotyping was the straw that broke the camel’s back. This wasn’t true by the slightest in Bruno’s mind. Not at all. And he lived there for the entirety of his childhood! Maybe even for his entire life discounting the last three days. Even foreign tourists have a better knowledge of Manhattan than Bruno!

“What?! My dad is a cop!” he yelped.

Aster’s irises strode around the axis. “Probably a corrupted one,” he snickered. “Let me guess: Is he British?”

“Maybe Spanish!” Blossom popped her eyeballs out to spit out.

The two troublemakers cackled even harder than usual. They were on the verge of sliding to the ground, flooding the room in tears of laughter. Aster finally gained control of himself as he kept himself still. “Could be! What's even funnier is your accent though.”

Gesturing his pupils to Bruno, he seemed to wish to provoke another emotion out of his victim once more—just for fun. However, that didn’t come true. Bruno only had the plain face of displeasure. Displeasure of what he’s witnessing. “I can't control that. Nobody can!” Bruno’s voice couldn’t filter any repugnance out of it. No way will he—or anyone—accept any sort of treatment like this in a new school! “Can *you* control *your* own accent, wherever it's from, Aster?”

As the words “wherever it’s from” danced to Aster’s ears, it could almost cause a stroke for him. A stroke of frustration. But before he could vomit out any more disturbing words, he thought of outdoing his past actions. Mockery and imitation were the way to go! “I can't control dat. Can yuh control your own accent. Wherevuh it's from,” he tried to mimic Bruno’s scruffy voice.

Bruno pouted even worse than before as his bullies laughed their lungs out.

“How can we even take you seriously like that?” Aster scratched while joking. “Yeah!” an offset voice from Blossom agreed in the background.

Not any of this was taken well for the blue boy. He was close to snapping, physically and verbally. “Well, I— “

“You’ll what? Tell the teachers? Our leaders? As if they'll care,” scoffed Aster, now firmly standing on the ground, on equal toes. “Aster!” Bruno hissed, so closely swearing. However, he got interrupted by Aster shoving himself suddenly to Bruno, keeping a mere distance away from each other. His shadow darkened who he stood above. “If you don't want me to beat you up, then hand me your lunch money.”

As threatening as he looked, no amount of coercing would change Bruno’s mind. The idea of lunch money that had come in didn’t either. Instead, his mind only struck thoughts on Aster trying to seem tough. If he had his leather jacket, he could be mistaken for a gangster. “Why are you beating me up?!” Bruno cried.

Aster backed away from his victim. His sneer couldn’t have made things darker. “It’s fun.” Bruno screamed, “Fun!?” No amount of this could be fun for him, and anything would be. The idea of fun is subjective, but randomly bullying a newcomer shouldn’t be one of them.

Amid the angst between the two boys came Michael. The storm created didn’t stop anyone from noticing his entrance. As a matter of fact, Aster could instantly detect him, as evident by the fact that he smashed Bruno into the locker, hitting him against his heavy books. The door shut strongly.

“Aster?” Michael asked, most likely at the sound of the slam and the perpetrator’s light squeaking of embarrassment. It wasn’t out of shame or sympathy, however. Just out of his own gains. To avoid ‘pointless’ detention even if it’s justified. Aster turned his back to his leader, along with Blossom, although she was actually eyeing him since he arrived.

“… What was that?” came after a moment of silence, as if someone had died.

“Nothing!” squirmed Aster.

Michael examined even further as he approached his subject closer. Possibly what’s behind him too. The number is labeled on the locker. Then, he twisted his face just to look at the elephant in the room. “Why are you in the locker room... With a Class 3 student!?” he exclaimed.

Aster stared at Blossom, squinting with his irises as if she was a foreign object in the room. Soon, it skated towards Michael’s eyes, trying to meet it.

“Gee, I don’t know. Maybe because I’m friends with her? Don’t you know that?” he snarled. It *was* obvious, even Bruno knew from the moment he stepped foot into the school. “And we're just... Getting ready together,” Blossom lied, seeming to add in with Aster’s statements.

The lies filled Bruno’s insides with fury. Injustice couldn’t be more present at a time like this. Indeed, Michael could be oblivious, but comeuppance must be served soon enough.

“Is that so?” Michael inquired, now surveying Blossom’s suspicious expression. It was odd since she wore the same innocent mask she always had. “Of course!” Aster tried to deter his leader from his friend. However, it was only background noise. All it did was allow Michael to look at his underling straight in the eyes. “Really?” he scoffed afterwards. “I heard some banging earlier from that locker,” he gestured to the door labelled “21” with his index finger.

“It’s nothing. Just Blossom’s phone ringing,” Aster lied.

Thankfully, it wasn’t believable.

The entire time, Bruno was merely watching through three strips of light that were on top of the locker. It was only now that he could see how unamused Aster appeared. He was *always* like that. Not only that, but he can now see how the wise leader looks. He had medium-sized chocolate hair. Black glasses layered over the azure eyes. Accompanying a white shirt was a jacket, finishing before the hips. Sadly, his pants couldn’t be seen, but a simple greenish gray could be made at least from the top.

Like his face, his voice turned soft. “Aster, just tell me the truth. I am your leader after all.” Sympathetic as much as it was, that didn’t work for the apathetic boy. Really, it only widened Bruno’s eyes. “He really *is* the leader!” though that conclusion only came for his grounded appearance. For a fluttering moment, Bruno felt justice could be finally served.

“I am telling the truth, dude. Don’t you trust me?” Aster hissed, almost wishing to circle around his higher-up. “Because you're not only a troublemaker, but you're also getting visibly close to someone from another class. I’m not too against divided friendships, but this is a bit too much,” he answered honestly.

“Visibly close? Isn't that rule only for, like, romances?” growled Blossom.

“What are you getting at here?!” Aster yelled a second after.

“I am simply making assumptions,” Michael sounded winded while saying. “Now, we can't waste any more time ruminating here. The bell could ring any

minute! Get yourselves prepared, *both* of you. Peppermint won't be happy, Blossom."

Now that his tone sounded more urgent and demanding, it was pretty clear at that point why he had the role of leader. Being commanding and ordering around are the most important pieces of the perfect leadership pie, after all. After that, it was safe to assume that Michael would walk out right then and there. But he didn't. He stayed, possibly to see if Aster and Blossom would act out of line behind his back, or even see if they *were* hiding anything—which they are.

"Why did you come anyways?" Aster questioned.

"It's my duty to check on you... but also to inform you to keep your eyes peeled for... any suspicious person," Michael said. It was clear as day that he was hinting about Terrance's presence.

"Suspicious person? What's the meaning of this? Do you mean someone working for the government?! Darkeners?!" panicked Aster.

"What? No! Just a man roaming around the school."

Blossom cried out a gasp. "Terrance!?"

Michael swallowed. "We're not sure, but Alex told me—"

Aster narrowed his eyes. Blankly looking at Michael dead on. "Alex? He only said some suspicious guy was here. Great. Are you really so believing of that guy when he's all just talk!?" He sounded winded while ranting.

His leader spent no time wasting energy on breathing. "Aster! I am your leader!" he roared. The violet-hoodie boy standing beneath him wasn't too impressed, however. Only ice-cold and still in his position.

Bruno, who was watching behind a trio of blinds, finished squinting to view anything out of the slits. It was a sliver of how he could see the world. Ideas about Michael and Aster's swirled around his mind. "What's up with Class 4?" he thought to himself. There was some clear tension that extended to a cause further than simple troubling one to the other.

Suddenly… Bruno felt he couldn't stay firm anymore.

"Woah!" he gasped.

Slipped he did. Thrusting the door open, he fell out of it. That caused Aster to smash to the ground the same way Bruno did, though it's because the latter landed on him.

Bruno was still on the floor, while Aster spoke to his black view. “It’s not what it looks like…” he sighed, almost sounding like he got accused of being a cheater. But once Bruno could see again, Michael was already ticked off. It was evident by, when turning his head to see the leader, seeing the brick mask worn.

“BRUNO! PRINCE OF CLASS 2?! ASTER, BLOSSOM, WHAT’S YOUR ANSWER TO THIS!?” he screamed so blaringly, it could’ve been heard by the third graders in the many floors below.

Blossom shrugged, while Aster wasn’t looking at Michael at all. Instead, his sights were set on Bruno, who was just now rising from the floor. “Bruno! Why did you—” Aster stopped himself by ringing a hollow groan. “Hand me your lunch money!” he spat as if he usually says it when he’s mad.

“Aster!” Michael called. He suddenly twisted Aster’s hips to be a man and look at him. Face to face, eye to eye. The once enraged expression melted into a pitiful one. A gulp was made out as Aster’s throat twitched. After shaking his head, Michael scolded his subject. “I'm shocked! I knew you were a ruffian of some sort, but I never expected you to stoop as low as to bully a newcomer! Let alone a vice leader!”

“Blossom told me to do this!” Aster’s sudden accusation jumped Blossom. Her eyes widened. “Me!?” she yelled. She tried to meet Aster’s gaze, but unfortunately couldn’t. It wasn’t going to be reciprocated anyhow. Instead, Aster stared anxiously at Michael. Transfixed. His voice turned fragile. “You know how Class 3 members are—"

“Enough!” Michael snapped. This froze Aster, Blossom and even Bruno. “Whoever is doing any of this, shouldn't continue! You two participated in this! Willingly! (Aster could be heard quietly whimpering, like a wimp) If I ever catch you bullying any student under my eyes... Then mark my words. I won't let you get away with it.”

Once Michael made his distance from him and the students, Aster snarled. “Great…” His head almost drooped down before remembering who was in front of him.

Bruno shook with terror once Michael switched his focus to him. It shouldn’t be so terrifying, but it was. “You should go now, newcomer. I apologize for my student,” he softly advised. Bruno swallowed, beginning to sweat. His smile could fall apart at any second. “It’s ok. I’ve been treated worse before!” he assured, sounding as if he’s backing away from an intimidating lion at a zoo.

“But you shouldn't be treated this way on your first day. It's a burden not to be inflicted on anyone,” Michael said wisely.

Considered it could’ve been, yet it was simply ignored advice. Bruno just blanked out. Suddenly, as soon as he snaps back to reality, he says “Yeah. Well, thanks anyways.” It was dry and nearly avoidant, the way he said it.

Taking the best opportunity he could, and as was advised to, Bruno ran away and never returned to the room, of course only for the day. As he was raring to go, he could briefly hear Blossom whisper something under her very breath. It was unexpected of her; it might as well have been Aster who said it. “Good riddance.”

Thoughts about what had just happened whirlpooled around Bruno’s noggin. It wasn’t much of a burden, as most of it didn’t matter to him. Aster and Blossom weren’t a problem any longer—not when there’s a bigger one at play at the moment. All he thought about was *Michael*. What was Alex going to say to him if anything about the occurrence was said. He grunted. It’s another way of saying ‘get out of my sight!’ to them.

It was a sudden hit on Bruno’s head that stopped him from continuing. “Mother!” Bruno hissed. When he slid his eyelids up, he saw Alex’s back in front of him. He gasped as the body had revealed its head. The beanie-wearing blonde. “Alex!” squealed Bruno.

“Bruno! I've got no time to waste: Can you interrogate the Class 3 members Connor mentioned earlier?” Alex ordered urgently on the verge of shaking Bruno to get his attention.

“What? Who?” Bruno asked.

“Mina, Poppy and Ella,” squirmed Alex. He could’ve been rushing to the bathroom and the way he spoke would’ve been the same.

“Now?!” exclaimed Bruno. Alex shook his worried head. “No! Sometime after lunch. I asked Peppermint permission,” he answered. Bruno nodded, humming to confirm he understood. Then his body snapped after realizing something. “Wait,” he called out. “Why do *I* have to do it?”

Alex stifled. “Other students are reckless, even from their own class. Even then, other classes don't know the mystery as well as we do. While I have an obligation to protect the class, especially at a time like this.”

“Alright then,” Bruno simply said, hesitantly.

In the mere distance arrived the vocals of two that had been heard earlier: Aster and Blossom. They were cackling, then both breathed at the same pace.

"Boohoo!" Aster jeered. Bruno spiraled to find the boy strolling with his partner in crime. They were casual, as they always were. "You ran to your leader, really like a baby to their mother!" "What? No! I just bumped into Alex!" denied Bruno.

Aster and Blossom scowled once they stop in a position, right next to Bruno. Suddenly, he was grabbed by Aster by his shirt's neck. He hung only by the little weight it had.

"Boy, you almost got me in trouble!" Aster hissed.

"*Almost…*" A growl could be made from Bruno. He was more bothered by the fact that Aster calls him as if he's a child.

"Listen to me or else my fists will meet you!" The threat started to horrify Bruno. A whimper jot out.

Before, Alex was silent. He kept to himself. Doing nothing but watch as Aster threatens his prince. Once a physical one was made, however, it woke him up. "Aster!" he called. Aster stared for a moment, squinting. Then he sighed and let Bruno's shirt go, along with his body.

"This isn't a good time to bully us! There's Terrance on the loose!" Alex continued after giving a stare at Bruno. Blossom gasped, almost squeaking. "Terrance!? So that's what Michael was talking about!" Aster evidently didn't like that idea. That could be told by how he rotated his irises. Scoffed. "You Class 2 fools are making it up," he spat, followed by an avoidance of sighting Alex and Bruno. "No. Blossom's classmates know about this. Three of them," Alex assured. "Really?" The voice was Blossom's. "Yes," Alex affirmed.

"Speaking of them: Are Mina, Poppy and Ella available? Even for later?" he soon inquired after mumbling. Blossom sounded hesitant. Her throat could've been scarred, and it made no difference in how she behaved. "Uhm... Yeah. Always available. But Mina's kind of having some... uh... digestive issues," she choked out saying. Alex blinked, vibrating his head. "Ok."

"Bruno, you can just talk to them in the school ground," Alex informed. Bruno was still sitting on the ground like a fool. He only got up once Alex prompted him. Before, nobody even seemed concerned for him, or the fact that he's been glued to the ground during this confrontation. "Alright," he huffed, trying to balance on his feet.

“I recommend talking to Poppy first. Out of the three, I believe she’s the most approachable,” Blossom advised. For the first time, she seemed as sweet as her voice would suggest she was. As expected, this shook Bruno. He trembled before stuttering out some words. “W-Which one… is it?” Contrasting him was Blossom, who was calm. “The girl wearing some reddish-orange clothes. Oh, a ginger too!”

Aster snarled. His moan was as loud as a lion’s roar. “That’s enough, Bloss. Let’s stop participating in *nonsense.”*

“It isn’t *nonsense*! What if *you* and Blossom are the ones in danger? Who’ll save you? Certainly not us!” Alex snapped like Bruno rarely has seen through the day. Aster finally gave Alex the look and acknowledgement he should. It was menacing how he looked. Yet, it wasn’t a surprising expression. “Well—”

Out of the blue, Alex started mumbling in another language. Not any a human would know. Not at all. It wasn’t German, French, Russian, definitely not English. Not even Chinese, which is the language Bruno would understand the least. It was almost alien. The lips didn’t even match any sort of vowels or consonants. As a matter of fact, Alex’s lips went so fast, it came before his sounds. Just like lightning before thunder. What made things stranger is that Aster responded, not with pure confusion, but with disgust. Disgust for what words Alex probably said. He understood. This is confirmed when Aster responded back in that very dialect.

Fear shadowed Bruno’s mind. Fear of not understanding anything that’s being told. It could be a secret evil plan. Any sort of secret. Maybe even something about him. He even felt a hint of odd longing. He’s not sure of what, but it was a longing for something.

It went for a while before Blossom finished the conversation. The same string of letters smushed together. Scaring him was the unforeseen narrowed eyes pointing at Bruno coming from her. It was clear she was addressing him.

Everything came back to normal after what felt like a dream. “Just stop treating him like this…” Alex sighed, almost piercing his nose. Aster scoffed once more. “Fine,” he spat. He and Blossom pompously trotted away and split up to their respective classrooms.

Alex was still glaring when Bruno spoke out of sight. “What was that about? Why did you and the others sound kind of… (He stopped for a solid minute while thinking of a random language) German?” Alex’s eyes swiftly darted to Bruno to the left of him. “Because I’m part-German?” he sounded sarcastic while saying, almost humiliating Bruno. It didn’t even make sense since the bullies were clearly

Asian. “Look, forget about that. Aster was spewing hogwash.” Bruno jostled his feet in quiet infuriation. “Of course he was. So were you and Blossom,” Bruno said, stepping in front of his leader.

Alex snapped. “Bruno!” he called out.

“Okay! Okay…” Bruno sighed afterwards.

Alex cleared his throat. “Try to socialize. Get to know the other students,” he robotically advised. He was clearly trying to change the subject. Bruno tried to search for a reason why in his brain, before visuals answered. He rotated his head to see students dashing out of class. Aster and Blossom returning to their classes was fruitless. They were getting out anyways.

“Is it break again?” Bruno asked, turning back to normal.

“No. It's just something we do in between class. We came before class ended, which is why we didn't see them,” answered Alex.

Bruno’s face turned sour, then to sorrow. “Right…” He wished the thoughts about the mystery could go away.

As he began to walk away, he could feel the sun shining through the swift clouds passing away. It wasn’t raining or thundering anymore! But would it really save the day from being so strange?

Chapter 9
Father Issues

After some time, Bruno ruminated around the floor. It was crowded. Filled with students who were mingling and jogging. This wasn't a school hallway—it was Central Park! That's how it was to him.

While walking, he examined the walls. It wasn't as decorated as the first two floors he saw, but it was colorful. Paintings from talented students that were assumedly from the past grades that stayed in the floor, grinning at whoever passes them. They depicted sunrises, sunsets, mountaintops, rivers and the solar system.

Passing the army of lockers that parallel each other, he reaches the locker room that he was once in. In the same position as he was shortly before. But it wasn't the same. It didn't feel the same. All because of the altercation between him, his bullies and a great leader. Instead of a warm welcome to pick up items, he saw yowls of arguing, memories echoing back to him. Those yowls were of actual talking, however. Groups of students having conversations.

Suddenly, a realization struck Bruno. "Oh! My books!"

His feet caught up to speed as he reached Locker 21, nearly pushing people out of his way. Once he opened the locker door, he found his books looking like they had come out of a tornado. They were sleeping on the floor. He gasped. "Oh no!" He cried after. Avoiding being found by anyone, Bruno picked up all the books and swiftly dropped them into his bag, zipping it. A sigh of relief emanated from him.

He sat on a bench that was standing on the only available space for anything. The only space without any lockers. If he had brought it, he would drink some lemonade to refresh himself off the horrors that had just been imposed on him.

As he watched peers speaking and laughing to one another, Bruno thought about Aster, Blossom and Michael. If students were only now allowed to get out of class, how could they come before? And why did Michael tell them to stay in class? Reasoned himself he did. Aster and Blossom could very well have just snuck out, knowing from what he heard about them. Michael could've been let out because he's a trusted leader. He could've excused himself to the bathroom and happened to come across the crime being committed. As for the second question: he guessed that everyone desperately wanted the duo to be separated. That includes their leader.

Upon snapping himself to reality, after shrinking those thoughts, he found some Class 3 students chatting in front of him. Not acknowledging his existence. Snapping to him were reminders of what he was tasked to do by Alex. Perhaps these students know something he doesn't. "*Class 3 members, they must be…*" he whispered to himself, affirmatively. He could tell by their subject being Blossom before it got switched to something else.

"Wow, so you're really saying Quaver is going to teach us music this year? Because if that's true, then we're in lots of luck!" a student gleamed. They were wearing a dark brown shirt, with a paler shade of the same color as a single thick stripe running across it. Matching his clothes was his bushy, sharp hair.

"Mind you, Chinchilla, Louise is also going to be teaching with him!" a short teen in blue sounded pompous while saying.

"So what? Louise isn't that bad anyways, right?" the boy, supposedly named Chinchilla to Bruno, argued.

Bruno blinked. He had opinions on Louise and Quaver already. The music teacher, or teachers. Never once did he hear that two teachers could teach a single subject, nor of a teacher's assistant. By the sounds of the conversation, it did seem new. Still, it was unheard of. Although Bruno could swear, by the tip of his tongue, he remembers acting in a play as a teacher's assistant… With someone familiar. Someone he recently interacted with. Yet, the memory was so far out of reach, it had already faded. "*Music teacher… Going to have to deal with him soon, then," he* suddenly whispered to himself.

"Also, don't call me Chinchilla again..." Chinchilla hissed.

That bursts Bruno back to reality. "Right!" he shouted. As expected, it caught the attention of the gang. That caused his body to react and stick together. He stammered a "H-Hi."

Abruptly, Bruno spotted Nathaniel. The first person he meets from school. "Hello, Bruno." Nathaniel greeted in a sing-song fashion. It was clear Nathaniel was trying to treat him like a child before the very eyes of his classmates.

"Nathaniel," Bruno groaned, not paying attention to anyone else. Only saw the narrow darkness between him and his enemy. "*That must be the rag-tag team of losers hanging around him,*" Bruno quickly mumbled under his breath so that nobody could comprehend him.

“So, you’re the newbie?” the pompous boy questioned, treating him akin to a toddler just like Nathaniel. Unlike the others, Chinchilla seemed warm and welcoming, especially with that smile of his. “Well then! Welcome!” His grin infected Bruno. Fascination sprouted in Chinchilla’s mouth. He gasped. “Hold up, you're in Class 2 if I remember correctly... which means you got to deal with Quaver next!”

Bruno copied Chinchilla’s face. “How did you know?” he asked slowly.

“I and Mav like to chat sometimes!” Chinchilla responded.

“Well, why are you here?” Nathaniel interrogated.

Bruno was immediately distraught by that question. Nathaniel didn’t have the right to know anything and everything about the happenings of his own class circle. He wasn’t entitled to that, unlike everything else in his life.

“Do you know where Mina and Mary are?” Bruno asked, trying to ignore his enemy.

A boy dressed in chocolate, like his friends, accompanied by a beanie, stepped up. “Those two? Why them specifically?”

“Oh! Must be about what happened to Class 2 for the past hour!” Chinchilla quickly answered. Bruno smiled even further for him. His nod confirmed everything, even if it was silent.

“Well, guess what? They aren’t here.” Nathaniel grimly stated.

“No. I mean. They're not absent, but they're in class,” another student, a part of the group, interrupted Nathaniel’s blow on Bruno. Nathaniel could’ve very well said more. He ignored it, however. “If you want to break the rules and enter the class, then be our guest,” he threatened.

Bruno shot a challenging look, meeting Nathaniel’s amber eyes.

“Thanks for telling me,” thanked Bruno to the others, as addressed by how he turned to them. But it felt cold, the way he said it. Even further driving that is how he blankly walked out of the locker. It was pleasure to Nathaniel, but the others exchanged glances of pure concern.

Before fully leaving the hearing distance between him and the gang, he could hear Nathaniel talking. “Watch as he spies on us through the class door window.”

Bruno trekked faster, trying his best to avoid the earshot of anyone. To his dismay, he heard the bell singing. It was the next period: Music.

“Dammit! I should’ve asked about their schedule,” Bruno said to himself.

As he was approaching class, he bumped into Nadia. “Hmph!” could be made out of him and her.

He had finally arrived. Finally! It felt like centuries since he had seen the once desolate classroom. It didn’t feel like a shell so much, for students littered the place. All equally noisy about each other’s businesses. Stingy about the volume of their voices. Bruno didn’t care though. It was music to him. The sounds of peace of mind and familiarity.

Suddenly, a teacher had banged the door open. Actually, it wasn’t a teacher—rather a teen roughly older than Bruno.

“Everyone! The teacher’s here!” the student screamed, almost blasting Bruno’s eardrums. “Quaver!” everyone cheered.

Bruno stared at the teen. He was wearing a strange shirt, divided in lilac and dandelion yellow. It looked like he was bearing an ice cream parlor’s outfit, perhaps even sillier. His hair was hazel, wisping in the hair, gelled.

Then soon followed a man, older than everyone in the room by a mile. He had blonde, shiny hair, much messier than the teen’s hair. His moustache overshadowed any sort of characteristics over him. It was prominent. Bruno noticed yet stayed quiet. “Louise, quiet down,” he ordered. Bruno looked up at the man, terrified. He, the supposed teacher, stared down at the boy. “Who are you to stand here?” he asked.

Bruno skimmed around the place with his eyes. There was nobody else standing—and everyone seemed to have returned magically. What is this place?

“Sorry…” Bruno apologized.

“You must be Bruno!” Louise gasped. It was at this moment that Bruno realized, Louise wasn’t just a student—he was a teacher’s assistant, for he stood tall with the teacher. Not only that, but Louise was the same person that clique of Class 3 members mentioned earlier.

“Yeah…” he gulped.

“Bruno Lively Ray. How curious!” the man’s demeanor changed as he exclaimed. His smile grew wide, taking over his formerly wilted face. “You’re the newcomer!”

Bruno nodded, leading out a soft smile.

“Well, follow the rules here, and go sit. I don’t want Mr. Dunkel to be upset,” the teacher advised. Bruno raised his eyebrows. “You’re… Quaver, aren’t you?” Quaver rustled up his collar, along with straightening his bowtie. “Indeed, I am” The

young pupil's eyes gleamed, his hair bristling in the newfound air-conditioned wind. He soon enough returned to his seat, positioned close to Alex once more.

The class went much more quickly than expected. All Bruno remembered throughout it were references to old artists from the 1970s or classics Quaver enjoyed when he was five. It was unbelievable. Not only that, but it seemed that Craig and Renard were close to the duo of Quaver and Louise, back in their Class 4 days where things were more fun. Well, it might be that way with rose-tinted nostalgic lens. The lesson went on for a while. That's how it felt like to Bruno. He wished he could ask the duo about what was going on with Terrance—what did he do, why did he do the things he did. Alas, he didn't. His anxiety overtook him. Perhaps first impressions really can rub off things wrong.

Eventually, it did finish at the song of a bell. It crowed like a rooster, waking up everyone from the lesson—and wake up they did.

"Swimming class!" everyone yelled together. They were akin to a unit to Bruno.

Quaver and Louise smiled and nodded, letting go of Craig's table. "Indeed! I hope you're all safe there, especially seeing that you nearly got trapped the last time you lot got out of the bathroom." Quaver grinned. Bruno felt a surge of shock in his body. He *had* to grill them on. The urge, the temptation, was it enough for him to hold? Quaver's little speech at the end didn't help anyone anyways. As a matter of fact, it feared them even further. Even Craig and Renard were concerned.

Quaver snickered before moving himself out of the room with his ear-blasting sidekick. The latter walked backwards as he waved the class.

Bruno noticed all the students were beginning to take off from class, raring to go and have a swim. He soon followed and boasted a wide smile, though it wasn't wide enough to adore Alex. Instead, he was still blankly staring at the floor. Of course, his good friend noticed. "Alex?" he asked. Bruno was about to pit himself to his chair again before he restrained himself.

Alex gazed at his friend as he was supposed to. "It's... seriously swimming now," Alex blurted out as he realized. His eyes that met Bruno's were timid. While the yellow-clothed boy was leaving his brain to marinate in that fact, his friend continued being as jolly as ever. "You haven't packed any swimsuits? It's fine, I haven't either—"

Alex snapped loudly. “No!” he screamed. “It’s just…” He kept stuttering. His repeated letters didn’t stop Bruno from feeling some form of sympathy. “It’s my father’s lesson” Bruno’s body brazenly kept twisting around as if it was as lost as his brain. “The Duke Wilson guy everyone keeps mentioning to you?” he questioned. The truth wasn’t discreet at all, for Alex immediately responded with a rash nod. “Yes!” wailed Alex. “Look, I'm extraordinary at swimming, unlike PE, but... Oh my father...”

The wallows of Alex intrigued Bruno to the core. This was evident by his eyes squinting, hungry for a statement. “Interesting. Swimming is never my strongest subject, but I enjoy it! And I thought you love your father,” he said. His friend gave a good scowl. It almost jumped Bruno up. “Are you kidding? He’s—”

The door suddenly jammed open. It was Micah, a member of Class 4, and a face the two friends could recognize, and one who one of them just had a nasty encounter earlier—Aster. His face as foul as ever.

“Hey! You guys have to go for swimming class now! So get your swimsuits ready.” Micah suggested as he opened the door. His eyes glistening in the artificial lights. His blue beanie reflecting off of Bruno and Alex’s hazel pupils. It was obvious that the Class 4 students just got out of swimming. “Ah, don’t worry! We know,” Bruno assured, about to say the student’s name before remembering he doesn’t even know it.

Off in the background while Bruno was packing, he heard shallow whispers coming from Aster. “… See that new boy?” he sensed the boy pointing at him. “Yeah. What’s wrong with him?” his peer replied back. Without an answer, Aster chuckled.

Once Bruno turned back and held Alex’s reluctant hand to move out of the door, he didn’t notice someone’s leg in front of him on the floor. Because of that, he tripped and fell, his head clashing with the recently wiped tiles below him. As expected, Alex noticed it before he could’ve gotten hit. “Ouch!” bellowed Bruno. Aster cackled loud and indiscreetly. Perhaps even his own classmates could hear him from a mile away. Micah was one of them, and he sure was unhappy. His once pleasant expression melted into horror.

“Good luck drowning, Bruno!” Aster attempted to cough up while laughing. At the same time, Bruno started to lift his head up from the moisturized floor. It’s probably what the pool water will taste like, and that’s exactly what Aster was

thinking as well. “Hey! Aster, how many times do I have to tell you to stop doing this!?” Micah snarled.

Bruno finally got to his feet soon after Micah spoke, his face dejected and weak. The bark pupils enlarging into puppy eyes that makes him seem sympathetic. Whimpers emanated out of him like a kitten’s cry for its mother. Alex pulled the frozen Bruno towards his left shoulder then curled his lips, “Come on, he's got no business with us now.”

The two walked away, more swiftly than usual, while Bruno felt a hint of being watched—by Aster and Micah. He ignored it anyways, as his mind was set on just avoiding them. However, his ears couldn’t ignore their soft murmurs before the light footsteps reaching the sharp right side of the corridor. Before he knew it, by turning his head back, the two students were gone.

Upon looking back to the front, he twisted himself to give some attention to his class leader. The bitter stunned feeling he experienced earlier still lingering under his skin.

“Well, you were... going to tell me?” he asked, trying not to shudder. Alex’s eyes wilted, shaking away to avoid Bruno. “Yeah, well, it's just that my father is the reason why my family is so torn apart,” a voice that belonged to the boy sounded dazed while saying.

Bruno’s brain paused despite walking as if nothing had stunted his thinking. “Hold the phone!” he exclaimed as a realization came about from him. “I just fell down because of my bully and now I'm learning that my class leader has a dysfunctional family?” His vocals sounded as lost as ever. It’s true that this first day of school has to be the most insane one out of any other in his life, or even history. However, it seemed to be ordinary to his powerful friend strutting beside him. “Correction: A divorced one, but the rest you aren't wrong in,” Alex smirked. His face soon was marked with a grimace, “Oh, and not only that, but my father married the scummiest woman alive!” A groan came out so loud, even those in the bathroom can hear him. “Lila,” he belted out under his breath.

The atmosphere didn’t help. The corridors the duo were trotting through looked like an empty hospital late at night. Dimly lit because of the broken lights no staff were paid enough to fix, nor were the officials going to hire any handymen. Drab, empty and gloomy especially with the absence of students. The white-tiled floors and the beige walls didn’t make matters better. It only added to the creep factor. He didn’t exactly have time to spare to look at these rooms since he had to

spend seconds running to teachers before viewing. The first floor truly contrasted as it was colorful and vibrant. In the current ground, it was nothing, a shell, only lifted earlier because Bruno was in a rush. Now? It’s only between him and his buddy and nobody else. What made things worse were the horror stories his classmates told him. If it was true, then these corridors really do spell danger that his flight or fight response keeps yelling at him during these dull moments.

After a span of stillness, Bruno stuffed his mouth with a solid heal to his bitten tongue. “Hey, look, it'll be fine,” he chuckled as he broke the ice. “Everyone goes through dark days, and your family woes are gonna be the reason for them this time 'round! You can get through it.” His jolly assurance didn’t help Alex from feeling blue. “And hey, you've got me!” Bruno added as a cherry on top. Contrary to his expectations, Alex did not grin at all. Quite the opposite. He had a wide grim frown drawn on his face.

“As if that's any better than being alone,” he hissed. “You don't even know how I'm feeling right now! You have both your parents, happily together with you.” There was an offended expression stuck on Bruno’s face. It reeks of a strange mixture of pity and haughtiness. “How did you even know?” a squeak whirled out.

An answer wasn’t presented to Bruno. Instead, his friend simply sneered. His mental state obviously lost, stranded away from the class prince. Now it only felt like Alex was the cold leader he felt like he conjured an image of upon meeting him. That’s what Bruno thought of him. Alex then finally took himself away from Bruno, his feet tapping and vibrating off the hollow corridors.

For some reason, Bruno experienced a dab of familiarity. In his mind, it swirled about his king. It had the same emotions as before. As if the spirits of a past life were cooing up on his ears. As if nothing he was going through was even the truth.

Gazing forward, there were the dozen students still trekking through the halls that wailed for their presence. Down at first floor they were, where most of the sports facilities were located. One of the kids to sum up the classroom was Mandy, hopping with her best friend, Maverick. Bruno knowing that Alex was too caught up in his own world to listen to him anymore, left him for his schoolmates who he knew would give him an ear. His legs could’ve only taken him long enough to get him to reach the teenagers. Despite clearly seeming so, Bruno pretended he didn’t intentionally approach the pair.

“Hey, Bruno. Alex got upset, huh? Had a fight?” Mandy suddenly brought up as soon as she sensed a spike of Bruno’s skin. This caught him off-guard as he tried his best to keep a low profile. “What?” he grinned. His attempts to stop tearing up were close to unsuccessful. “No! Far from it.”

Maverick gave Mandy an ounce of an amused expression before breaking out into a hefty chortle. After, the girl gawked her shadow eyes at Maverick’s equally dark tufts of hair before turning her head three hundred sixty degrees to stare at Bruno. He surprisingly didn’t say a word that amounted to a reaction. “Guess the teen hormones really got to him!” her chin jiggling as she put her full body into facing her classmate. Behind her, Maverick snickered, “Man, he really is a late bloomer,” making things even more subtle. “Or maybe the supernatural in him is awakening,” Mandy added with a duplicated expression.

It was plain to see, Bruno was growing uncomfortable. His tears gave itself more of a presence, his sweat bleeding out of him, his eyes dawdling around before targeting itself straight at Mandy’s forehead. Swallowing his tears, and spitting out confusion, he croaked out, “Excuse me, what?”

“Oh boy, here we go again!” Maverick said, rolling his eyes while his hands threw itself up in the air.

Mandy, who didn’t seem as bothered as Maverick, led out a soft grin that welcomed Bruno into a good conversation, or rather a conversation about something potentially vital. They then paused their walk. “You see... Me, Max and Renard have been feeling something strange in Alex,” she explained. Intriguing him, Bruno raised his palm to reach his chin, trying to support it. “How?” his curiosity turned conspicuous to his peers. Mandy’s eyes basked in the light. The brightness reflected on Bruno, but that didn’t fix his wondering brain. “We don't know how, but we just do sense these sort of things,” Mandy answered.

Bruno anticipated a better answer, yet that’s all he got, and that’s all he’ll get, because Mandy continued walking as if there was nothing going on. Bruno felt the abrupt start, following his classmate swiftly after. He almost froze due to thinking too deeply about the meaning behind any of this. If Mandy was supernatural, along with the other students she mentioned, Renard and Max, who are both seat partners. At this point, it couldn’t be a coincidence. That’s what Bruno’s train of thought landed him in. Nevertheless, he agreed to himself that the back-and-forth led him to have more questions than answers.

It didn’t take long for Mandy to note how Bruno was feeling. It was obvious by how he kept twitching and almost forgot to follow her. “If the supernatural senses something in someone... It always means something, Bruno. That's something you should know here in this school!” she told her friend. “Not that it has anything to do about Alex's family life, of course, but just a food for thought for you.”

The young boy thought about it for the half-second every moment always come across as that way to him.

“But c’mon Mandy,” Maverick crowed. “Whatever you said should be a given, even if Bruno is a bit stupid!”

That stung Bruno personally deep inside his soul. It seemed like a dagger thrusting into his heart, bleeding out every dark word it ever told itself. Even if it was an off-hand statement, the student was ashamed.

“Right,” snarled Mandy, visibly so.

Bruno snapped out of the melancholic state to view the world at it was at that point in time. He gazed at his classmates before emitting a subtle scowl. Stepping away from them without noticing during their bantering, he constantly reiterated to himself, *“Out of sight, out of mind.”* Only if that was kept in mind for the rest of his life.

Bruno momentarily got himself through Floor 2 and its long stairs down. His legs almost couldn’t feel like itself anymore, sobbing over its endless work. That isn’t great motivation for a swimming class, where leg usage is required. It’s not like Bruno can excuse himself in the first class, however, and the throbbing pain went away as expected.

Finally, he managed to reach the pool along with his classmates, who he miraculously caught up to, much to the dismay of Mandy and Maverick, both were stuck bickering with themselves and, prior to the second they came, Bruno.

For the first time, the pupil got to see the room. It wasn’t like any other in the school, other than the gym. It was as wide as it and had enough space for a pool large enough to fit in every eager swimmer. The water of the pool itself, while full of chlorine, made the class feel like they were at a beach, right about to party. But this wasn’t a party, and they weren’t at a beach, they were at school and had to deal with a coach. That coach being on top of the highest diving board, which was roughly 32 feet off the ground. Bruno had imagined it was much taller than that, he bet anyone shorter than him visualized it to be worse.

Suddenly, from the same diving board, the man standing on top dived head onto the crystal waters. His back flip concerned everyone, yet it impressed them at the immediate start. It got better as a group of senior students had appeared on the surface of the water, floating. They were spinning in circles together, spitting out the same colorless liquid out of their mouths like a fountain. Together, their legs then held itself off the water, now finally showing the surfaced students to the kids in the back.

At the spark of a second, the man who jumped had darted himself out of the middle of the circle that the seniors formed. He landed perfectly on the floor—no imperfections seen upon contact to the ground, not even a slight slip. The seniors stopped once the Class 2 members clapped in unison, including Bruno.

In the midst of the appreciative cheering, the coach dipped his head, leading himself into a bow as he bent his back down. As soon as his hips jumped up to normal, he inhaled heavily, then lifted his arms in the air as if he was holding a large brick. “Welcome, class, to your first swimming lesson of the year!” he announced.

Everyone clapped one again. They were bees upon finding a jar of honey. Well, everyone was joyous except for Alex Wilson. His mouth turned crooked as he didn’t know how to express his feelings. Indeed, the coach wasn’t any coach—he was Duke Wilson. Alex’s father. “Hoo wee! Duke never fails to pull off a show!” Winnie commented. Renard snickered explosively. “Alex’s dad is so cool like that!”

Alex’s head flashed straight at Renard, almost snapping. His eyes glared like a snake about to catch its oblivious prey. A pout didn’t improve Bruno’s opinions on how his friend is handling his emotions. “Don’t call him Alex’s dad, please, my subjects,” Alex whispered while trying his best holding back a hard snarl. Soon enough, Renard turned brick-red, his cheeks pushing his mouth together at once, then twisted himself away from his class leader.

The seniors leaped out of the blue surface, then into the white smooth floor, slowly approaching their occupied coach. It was at this moment that Bruno realized these students weren’t much older than many of his classmate’s siblings—atleast Nadia’s, whose siblings he knows personally. Not only that, but one of them came off as a relative of Aster. She copied his square head, his pimples on the forehead, the spiky bushy hair, and the tiny stature. The only difference seen was their hair. The girl’s was brown while Aster’s was pure black.

A grunt from Alex was drowned out by Bruno's discussing thoughts, and so was Duke speaking out, "Thank you, all! And most especially you, seniors!" Adoring adolescents who were leaving turned blurry to his vision.

Out of the blue, Bruno could hear the coach refer to him not in his sight. "Ah, a new face in the class!" he called out.

Bruno quickly rotated his head to glare at his new teacher. After searching for those synchronized students, he couldn't find them anymore. They've left, and he didn't even realize it while lost in thought.

"Last time was that sickly boy, Casper. Now who must you be?" Duke continued, looking as if he was dying to learn more than ever. Bruno pushed himself back from his teacher. Judging by how Alex had described his father, even if it could be biased due to his actions, Bruno can't brush any of his testimonies off as false. Perhaps he also be cold from the nearby water, or it could also be because the concept of Aster having siblings made him shiver. Anyhow, he felt sickly. "Oh, let me guess: Bruno!" the teacher added after seconds of silence. Summer had gone by, that's what Bruno believed. "And judging by your name, you're a Spaniard," Duke came to the conclusion. His smile rubbed off on Bruno in a strange way.

Definitely, the young boy was lost. No clue on how to feel about his newfound teacher who was different than the others, for he was the father of his classmate—not only his classmate, but his leader—and not only was he simply his father, but Duke also married the worst lady in the world, at least in Alex's words.

"Wow!" Bruno chuckled. "How did you know?" Bruno's eyes skimmed to his classmate before jumping back to Duke. "Okay well, I'm half-Spaniard."

"I just know. It's my intuition," Duke answered vaguely and nearly menacingly.

Anticipating a little sentence from Alex, Bruno glanced to his side to see Alex shortly moaning. "And he isn't even going to talk about his wife whose children bear half her blood. Incredible!" While it was clear he wasn't talking to anyone, he certainly wished he could with his subjects.

"Ah, what did you say, son? Don't be shy, don't be muffled!" Duke sounded extremely coddling.

"It's nothing," Alex snapped.

"Don't speak in German in front of me."

"I wasn't speaking—"

“Alright, all of you go change to your swimsuits!” announced Duke, suddenly changing his threatening tone to a more presentable voice. The students ate this up, unlike Bruno whose concern dominated his thinking. They went off into the locker room without a second thought. It’s almost like this is the norm for them. And unlike the students, Bruno didn’t have anything in the locker, since he was the newcomer. Instead, everything was tucked tight in his stumpy bag.

Alex’s anger held on even when his father was leaving the scene, not without a malicious blaring smile.

Bruno decided to follow his teacher instead, knowing of Alex’s bottled up rage. He had no right to barge into his friend’s business anyways.

A conversation ensued between the young boy and his coach. He doesn’t only wanted to flare his social battery up, but also perhaps to grow more comfortable with the father. It could improve how he sees him, in a less subjective, biased way. Not second-hand opinions from someone who personally had worse experiences than him.

“Hey, did you know I'm class prince?” Bruno asked, making himself naïve and sweet.

“Class prince?” Duke seemed flabbergasted while questioning. He reacted to a divorce announcement, it felt.

“... Don't you know your son is class king?” the student further asked, forgetting the fact that teachers don’t usually know anything about the class system and its ongoings.

“Oh, incredible! Congratulations, young boy,” Duke pretended to congratulate. Everyone knew deep down that it wasn’t genuine. He didn’t even know what he was celebrating for.

“Thanks! On my first day too!”

It took the class well enough to be prepared, but they finally did. Some looked incredible in their swimsuits, while others… Could be more desirable in Bruno’s eyes. The one to run out in front is the eager Sheldon. While he was giddy for almost all the lessons, he was the most jubilant for swimming. It could be less so on normal days because sparring class couldn’t occur.

“Yes! Let’s do this!” he screamed in excitement. Riley was about to follow suit once Sheldon started dashing towards the edge of the pool before Mr. Wilson stopped them. “Wait, you two!” he was close to scolding as he snapped.

But it was too late for the former. Sheldon had performed a cannon ball onto the chlorine-infested water. “Aww,” Mr. Wilson wallowed.

The dejected coach rushed to his feet. In the snap of a second, he returned from the water with Sheldon’s hand being held by him. Obviously, by Sheldon’s bored expression, he wasn’t too glad about what had happened.

“Alright!” Duke started, attempting to breathe the best he can after standing up. “Before any of you go cannonball, you must listen to me! We'll do some simple tricks, as it is the first day and there's a newcomer around the block. Do some doggy paddles, then some butterfly swimming if you can.” Then he stared lazer-eyed at Violet, whose cheeks flushed. “And you must *show* it to me,” he demanded. Everyone hesitantly nodded. They went to dive, but not before exchanging slit-eyed glares at Bruno. *Was he the reason why Duke is reacting this way?*

“And no funny business like last year, Maverick and Mandy!” Duke called out before the pair of friends jumped in. They cackled before disappearing into the blue. He was dazed once he pointed himself towards the newcomer.

“You do know how to swim well, right?” he genuinely asked.

And it was a good question, especially for the swimming class, and a question Bruno couldn’t answer without embarrassment in his veins. “If someone I know is in danger…” It was the best response he could give, and it showed he was noble. *Bonus*, he presumed. However, it wasn’t the best for his survival during the classes. Nobody would really be in danger through any lessons. At best they’ll be choking, and at worst they’ll be happily splashing at each other! If anything, *he’ll* be the one in danger. He was mental for saying anything other than a straight and honest “no.” It was too late anyways.

“Good starting point. Most would say nothing at all!” the teacher laughed, putting the salt on Bruno’s mental wound. “Okay so, just imagine that someone you care so much about is drowning..,” he advised minutes after. It did calm down Bruno’s spirits, but he can’t think of that *all* the time. “Just imagine any situation. *Any*,” Duke went on.

Bruno’s eyes strolled across its circumference before returning it to view the pool. “Alright. Guess it’s time to div—”

“Not yet! Doggy paddle first,” Duke proclaimed, almost in the same coddling manner as when he spoke to his son. Abruptly, Duke pulled out a kickboard, then

placed it on top of the clear cover of the liquid. It kept dancing while Bruno groaned as quietly as he could. “Oh,” he led out.

“I'm trying to springboard you, Bruno. Only that! Motivation is key to success, y'know?” encouraged Duke. Bruno nodded in faux agreement. “That’s right,” he coldly said.

After Bruno dipped his feet, then his whole body into the water, the coach pointed at the board. “First, you paddle around for a bit. Once you find your balance, use this to practice your kicking. After you do a full circle across the pool, try to do it without the board while paddling,” he explained. Bruno agreed similarly to the nature of earlier. “Okay.”

Finally, Bruno felt free. He was finally left alone with himself and the pure nature of water. Careless as he was, he was lucky he didn’t manage to bump and injure himself into any of the exposed concrete from the ground. The water flashed through him, almost tickling some parts of his shoulder while his palms tried to punch past the buoyant board. His legs pushed him towards the end of a session, but it felt so far that it could take ages.

Determination fired up in him once he reached the midpoint. Arriving there took a decade, so the rest of the run would end in a century.

At any moment he could fall off and dabble down without anyone noticing. Although it was difficult for all his classmates surrounded him. Ranging from the calm and collected Roselynn to the panicking Connor and Casper, then finally to the…

Hit!

Athletic and flexible, Sheldon!

“Oh! Sorry!” Bruno swiftly apologized after regaining his shortly lived lost conscious. Sheldon returned shortly after, shaking his head, the water spraying at Bruno. “It’s fine, I bump into everyone!” he grinned.

It took until this very second for Bruno to realize that it wasn’t that he didn’t see Sheldon—he was under him. Sheldon just jumped out of the water and then there they splashed.

Before Bruno was going to ask with snark, *“Why don’t you just stop scaring us like this?”* He noticed the brutally speeding Alex. In his mere shorts that his father forced him to wear, the class leader looped through the wide swimming pool. He went on even quicker than Spencer, who was noted from the murmurs and off-hand

rumors that he was one of the best students of the swimming lessons. Alex went so fast, he didn't even get a chance to greet his class prince.

"Blimey! Alex is wicked!" Bruno exclaimed loudly.

"Actually, he's holding back," Sheldon snickered.

Bruno gasped so hard, he almost broke his thorax. "Holding back?" he breathed in, exasperated. "*This* is holding back?"

Sheldon laughed even more, extending his joy. "Somehow yeah!"

"But Alex is… really… you know…" Bruno made his best attempt to avoid insulting his leader, probably trying not to disclose any chances where he could lose a possible friendship with him. "Not… the type to be like this."

The classmate shrugged. "I've heard it's because he's been having swimming lessons since he was a baby with his father."

Alex's breeze wisped through Bruno, making his hair strands fly. "I guess I should've expected that since his father is our teacher right now," he considered slowly. Sheldon briefly nodded.

Soon after, Bruno watched a second more before leaving off into autopilot. He almost forgot what he was doing—practicing for a doggy paddle. Indeed, while Alex and Spencer were out there taking twenty laps, Bruno was still a puny swimmer trying to learn how to do a doggy paddle on a silly kickboard.

During that time, he was lost in thought while his legs continued swaying and his hand gripped on well to the now wet board. His thoughts swam around like he and his peers currently are. This mainly consisted of how Duke was so knowledgeable in the *art* of swimming that he managed to teach his son and some other kids how to swim when they were toddlers. So much so that said son can outdo even the best of students in the senior grades.

The lesson took double the time for the ordinary boy, for he also had to take a lap without the board. It was a miracle that he finished both rounds barely before the end of the period, only ten minutes left! Now he was amazed by his marvelous abilities… of swimming like a third grader.

Bruno got to his feet, hopping out of the swimming pool. He felt like a dog, for he was close to shaking away all the water out of him. Instead, he kept heavily panting. In the mere distance was Alex, now wearing white shorts with a yellow top that he could merely see when he was swimming as swiftly as a leopard, much different than the last time Bruno saw him.

Ignoring the change in wardrobe, Bruno approaches Alex. “Well, it looks like you had a good time in the blue,” he moaned. “Unlike—”

Bruno got stopped by Alex, shoving him to the ground. It was robotic—as much as his expression. “What the!?” Bruno exclaimed. He then had a deep stare at Alex’s hazel irises. Never realizing how overpowering he can be. “Golly mother, Alex—”

“Please don’t think too lightly of my father!” Alex started urgently. His panic transferred to Bruno, who, despite an attempt to take a swim, was sweating. It was unmistaken as it went along with shivers—albeit it could also be from freezing. “He’s not only a cheater… He’s worse! He’s an *embarrassment* to me!”

His cries and pleads sounded more like threats to Bruno. His eyes went rogue. It kept trying to escape the sight of his agonized friend before it finally locked into Alex, his pupils shining off the light of the pool.

“Please, Bruno…” he begged once more.

“You didn’t have to do that though, did yo—”

Suddenly, Alex’s mouth started moving, although his vocals came after—as if it flashed open at the speed of light, like lightning. The words he spouted were un-intelligible. None of it made sense—none! At first it sounded German. Something *was* said, along the lines of “It only isn’t my father, you blabbering imbecile!” At once, Bruno’s eyebrows stride above his eyes, almost reaching his hairline.

Is Alex being possessed by one of those rumored ghosts taking residence in this school—or even worse, the devil itself? Is Alex just so frustrated and had his ego so shattered that he began speaking in another tongue? *Is this normal?*

For a moment, Bruno felt a fluttering sense of dread. A second of silence passed until Alex switched the language to one wholly unknown. Complete gibberish, it was. Though only one word was understood—or rather a sentence.

“I know what you did.”

Bruno could swear to his soul that it was real. It wasn’t a sickening delusion. It wasn’t the weakened wind. His swallow was as quiet as a faraway fly’s buzz.

Alex really went on.

And on.

And on.

And on.

And on.

Until…

Splash!

Before he knew it, Bruno was thrusted into the water!

The pool was miles deeper than he thought. All he saw was blue mist at the two sides of his eyesight, the tiled pattern truly in front of him, and so was the nothing expression that worn on Alex's face like a tattoo.

Bruno feared that look more than his own skin screaming and choking.

As he kept descending, so was his hope for marching on with life. Was this it? Is he finally going to pass—only at the youngest age of 14? It couldn't be.

Only thoughts of the outcome of his death littered his mind. Alex wouldn't care judging by his face. Aster and Blossom would laugh about it, but… His classmates… His family… Would they really feel the same? The former is already traumatized by the missing teachers… Would a dead newcomer help with their anxiety?

Before Bruno could end himself off, Duke dives in. His head could only be seen, and it sure was frantic.

Finally, after some help from Duke, Bruno got to see the light of day again—literally. He finally reached the surface he was wishing to find again. Fresh air to breathe. He was safe. Perhaps except for the daunting Alex.

"What happened!?" Duke screamed, interrogating Bruno.

The boy didn't say anything. Only staring at Duke. Only that. He could feel the wave of dread crashing on the teacher.

"What happened?" he continued repeating.

Bruno could feel nothing but a burst of adrenaline. Duke's grilling truly made the situation ten times worse! His mind raced, not knowing what to do. Tell the truth, or lie about the situation to cover up for his friend, who nearly drowned him? Alex could react and punish him easily—but telling Duke the truth would mean everything to Bruno.

Then came a sudden flash of thinking to Bruno as he spots his leader's face. The scowl was enough to let Bruno turn into a 'snitch'.

"Your son… Your son did it. He pushed me after swearing!" Bruno violently announced.

The crowd of students animated into shock. All gasped noisily at once. Meanwhile, Alex visibly grinded his teeth, knowing of the consequences.

A tempered grimace was made out. Bruno knew so well that he might've ended his so-called friendship with Alex before it even started. But that didn't matter in the slightest. The pure fact that Alex looked at him with doom before he felt meant the universe to him.

"And? Is this true…?" Duke asked, somehow calmly. Although there was a clear thirst for truth and justice in him.

"Father—I—"

"I said, is this true? Has anyone bared witness to this?" Duke snarled as he stopped his son from any objections. It was what Bruno wanted to hear. Alex's jaw dropped of course.

One raised their hand. Among the gang of students dispersing from the one who did, revealed Spencer. "I do," he started. "I… I saw Alex talking to Bruno in some weird language. I doubt it was German, it sounded alien."

The crowd gasped once more.

"Alien?!" Duke snapped. "Alex is many things, a know it-all included, but alien? I'm certain I've never birthed or ever got together with one!"

"No! It's not… Alien," Mandy suddenly dismissed. "It's…"

"Shut it!" Alex screamed. It was clear that Mandy also heard it, but was too afraid to say anything when Spencer was brave enough to speak up. Nevertheless, Bruno got as terrified as the girl was.

Duke stepped in, his face towered over everyone. So much so that Bruno was obviously intimidated. His hair was a shadow of his forehead.

"Alex… It doesn't matter. You deliberately hurt the new student and nearly killed him! I know you don't fancy me much because of what I did to your mother, but this… This is so unbelievable! I expected better of you!" Duke scolded.

Alex didn't look so bothered with what his father said. As a matter of fact, he might as well have been scolded by any teacher. They'd cause the same, if not, more massive impact on his psyche. Instead of melancholic, Alex turned into an angered racoon.

"That's how I felt when I found out that you cheated on my mother. That's how I felt when I learned that reason why my parents divorced and why my mother ran back to Munich. How I felt when I had to take care of August… My stepsisters… Your own children!" Alex spat it all out.

Bruno's pretentious eyes turned sweet as he views his friend in a different light. Alex might've nearly drowned him, but with his mind being deluded with sympathy, he can't help but feel awful for Alex. His father wasn't only a cheater but drove his wife out of the country too!

Nonetheless, Bruno, without any breaths, interjected to stop the fight from continuing. "Wait!" he started. "I got it all wrong."

Duke blinked with a dry head while Alex narrowed his eyes on Bruno.

"I just slipped while I closed my eyes!" Bruno awkwardly chuckled while lying, rustling his hair with his fingers.

Duke blinked once more.

"Alright," he grunted with suspicion. "Bruno, be careful around the pool next time. Don't go walking around with your eyes closed—It can really kill you another time."

Duke's words sounded so dull, it almost seemed like he recited the rules of the school. Either way, Bruno brushes this off for a glare the coach gave to his son. The two were snakes ready to battle. It wasn't only the young boy who watched that uncomfortably. Other students did too. This was evident by their fearful expression and then strolling away as if nothing happened. Very much akin to when an argument nearly broke before they ran off to the locker room.

"You're lucky your new friend has let you off the hook," Duke hissed. Alex backed off, twitching his eyes. Duke took one last glance at Bruno then left off to the other children, contrasting the last time they've spoken, which was warm.

Alex darted back to see a neutral Bruno. "Why did you do that?" Alex questioned, not in anger, but pure wonder. "I saw you and your dad talking about your mom and… I didn't want to put you in detention," his friend explained with fear.

"Really?" Alex spat. "Then why did you snitch on me in the first place?"

"I was scared. I-I had no clue what you were saying. I thought you were threatening me!" Bruno wallowed.

Alex was horrified at the panicking Bruno, then let his head dance. "I wasn't," he denied. "Thanks for saving my skin anyways. My father would go ballistic on Principal Dunkel!" Despite the joking tone, Bruno wasn't laughing. He had a brooding frown and no trace of brightness in him. "He hates you, doesn't he?" Bruno sounded grim. Alex nodded, transforming his smile to the same frown of doom. Bruno, at the same time, remembers how Duke saved his life in spite of all this.

Getting roped up in family drama is what Bruno shouldn't do, especially between his class leader (and possibly his new friend) and the swimming coach who saved his life.

"Perhaps so," Alex assumed.

After a while of Bruno and Alex chatting, avoiding the water and watching their stunned classmates swim, Duke approached the unsuspecting friends.

Immediately, Bruno turned back as he sensed Duke's presence. Traumatized, Bruno started sweating and thought he'd somehow drown again. It was irrational, of course. He hopped from Duke anyways.

"Bruno, Alex," the coach called.

Alex soon twisted to look at his father, akin to Bruno. "I'm sorry but… You're both off to Class 1," Duke declared. Bruno and Alex both gasped in unison.

"What—why?" Alex snapped.

"We both did *nothing* wrong!" Bruno argued.

Duke grunted. "You lied to me," he accused. Bruno's jaw dropped. He really thought Duke believed him—perhaps not now.

"We didn't—"

"Just go. Or else Dunkel will know of all this nonsense," Duke threatened, especially pointing towards his son.

Bruno sighed with gloom while Alex growled in fury. They both eventually changed their clothes back to the way it was before and left the pool without any more words spilled. Duke was finally satisfied and left alone with his other more well-behaved and docile students.

The two friends strolled around the corridors, not without a pang of shame of course. While Alex wasn't so bothered before, he sure seems more so now. Perhaps it's the wretched embarrassment bottled inside, or the throbbing pain Bruno was emanating. Still, Bruno held a smug smile a while after they began their journey to Class 1.

"Man, you really went outward there, Alex."

Alex snarled quickly. "I just can't stand my father, ok?" The headache now overwhelmingly clear to his friend. "He's always playing the victim. Hate people like him. But he's my father, and I must love him, I suppose," he played this situation out as if it's some household clash, Bruno could very well say that from listening to the class leader's tone.

"... And he did teach you how to swim," Bruno retorted.

"Yes," Alex agreed reluctantly.

The two head on, passing the same barren corridors that they once went through in order to get to the pool. And the trip was as long, dull and colorless as was previously. To break the silence, Bruno thought about the best ways to begin a conversation. Suddenly, a question came to mind.

"Is being sent to another class a normal punishment here?" he asked.

Alex looked at his class prince in awe, then pushed his head to look at the roof. "Yes. Of course, some cases of class switching are more severe, like Aster and Blossom... those idiots." His reference to the bullies stunned Bruno. "They were from Class 1 when they got to Class 4 and 3 because they were such troublemakers together. Hopefully that won't happen to us this year." A chuckle bellowed out. "Don't be a bad influence on me!"

Bruno joined in with the unwarranted laughter. It was uncomfortable, yet he had a strange obligation to relish the friendship. "Oh, you bet I won't!"

Once the giggles died down, Alex tilted his head down to stare at the empty boards on the walls. "I must admit though. This punishment is fairly tame compared to others here..."

"Really?"

Alex nodded, flashing his head back to glare at the newcomer.

"Well, what are the other punishment?" Bruno asked, expecting the worst. He knew he could stomach it. However, it's not like Alex would know he could. That's why he visibly shuddered, then stuttered out, "I-I'd rather n-not say!"

Bruno watched as Alex carried on further than he did, his walking was a jolt ahead. Nobody can deny that he wasn't distraught by the thought of horrific punishments. His imagination already led him on back in his former school, how can his already insane current one be so different? The implications mean everything.

Finally, after what felt like forever, the pair reached Class 1. Its exterior was a duplicate of Class 2's, down from the run-down sign above the nearly torn apart door, to the dozens of stickers on the window of the aforementioned door. Class 1's consisting of the girly kind however. But Bruno knew what really mattered—the inside.

He and his leader opened the door, both at once, witnessing the 'magnificence' of Class 1. It sure was a curious sight to see, the classmates going at it a split second

before an adult attempted to burst through the door, causing Alex to back away avoiding a hit from him. Scared, the two friends were, for the adult suddenly crashed in. Possibly to scare them, which he succeeded in. The man blocked the duo from viewing the ongoings of the classroom. Instead, all they saw were his intimidating and brooding face.

"Hello," the man menacingly greeted. He was so terrifying, he couldn't even draw out a fake smile. Although even if he could, it would be so fake, it would lead the the two teenagers in the most opposite direction possible of how their opinion on him. "What are you two skittish fools doing here?" The man proceeded to tap his left feet once he let go of the door frame, but he didn't leave enough face for the students to leave. They shouldn't barge in anyway.

While Alex had to process a response, Bruno had time to think about the adult, who he assumed at this point to be the teacher—it should be a given. The man was average-sized, he had sienna wolf-like hair, strands jutting out, spiky and ruffling into a variety of directions. It was short, though. Short enough to not reach the border of the door frames. Accompanying his wolverine hair are refined glasses as dark as a shadow. Repping a cloudy sweater with a brown accent pattern, probably a product of the knitting. And below was a pair of denim jeans, partially ripped in the back, out of Bruno's view. It wasn't the only place with a rip either, for Bruno could spot multiple scars around the man's wrist, cheeks and even one running across his right eyebrow.

That scar didn't make Bruno's impression on the man better. It was evident that he automatically wasn't liked. For what reason? He didn't know. He didn't do anything in the school but try to find a couple of teachers and drown. What does he get? A pair of students always egging on him and now a teacher possibly hating on him. Bruno wasn't a telepath, but he knew full-well of how the man felt. His silt for eyes led out some energy into him. Clenched fists the young boy noticed during the silence. And of course, his twitching eyes and fuzzed up hair. His voice was even dry and hoarse enough to make him think that the adult was insane.

"Right, McRyan," Alex woke up. "We've been sent here by Mr. Wilson…" He swallowed a cup of pride. "As punishment."

McRyan grimaced; vexation became betrothed to his heart. "Punishment? You? Don't make me laugh!"

Bruno had a blank stare at him, so did Alex. “No, I’m serious,” his emotion plain as day. A snapping scoff belted out of impulse. “You know how much my father hates me! He’d make up any excuse to send me away from him.”

There seems to be a stubborn-off, for McRyan had hissed at him. “As if.” His face says it all to the normal young boy. McRyan’s teeth started to grit. It was stuck together. “But fine, if you must.” His growls were that of a huskey’s.

And so, the two young criminals entered the classroom. It finally sunk in for Bruno after all this time. He’s stuck in another class. Even if this’ll only last for roughly an hour, it’ll only irk Bruno and have him long for the time in his old class… It doesn’t matter if he’s only known his classmates for one day!

Bruno stared at the new faces. They lit up at the sight of the newcomer. Meanwhile, Alex tried to hide behind the boy, making him ironically more of a coward. He knew the consequences of this as much as Bruno. But the new boy was still in denial that he was deserving of it. He was still in denial that Alex wasn’t at fault for drowning him. Fear is now driving his current actions, earlier that day can’t be different.

For now, the two have to deal with these strangers for fifteen minutes. Well, strangers to Bruno. And oh will these fifteen minutes feel like fifteen years…

Chapter 10
Class 1

Upon entering the room, Bruno examined through it. Not so different from Class 2. The only differences are the messages on the board; they're sugarcoating much less than expected. It was the opposite of cheesy. And there's of course, the students, who are all now scowling at Bruno as he just happen to notice at the moment. It was plain to see that Alex caught their expression before his class prince did, since he wore a disgusted mask.

One was an exception, a boy dressed with a yellow top, accompanied by a grand red jacket flowing behind him. Intriguingly enough, above everything was a flame-colored scarf. Around him were black accents, and blazing hair to tie his attire together.

"Oi, Alex!" he heard a call. It was from the boy, as Bruno would find out when twisting his head to search for him.

"Oh, hello Mercury," Alex sounded bitter while greeting, dropping off a hissing tone upon saying the boy's assumed name. He might as well pass of a ridiculously formal and passive aggressive "salutations" to him. Instead of feeling any sort of joy, Alex seemed so obviously demented for whatever reason.

"Aye, sit here, where Kevin usually sits," Mercury offered. "You too, newbie, take a seat near me," he turned to stare at Bruno, the eye contact making him uncomfortable. The red boy pointed to an empty desk across from him, said desk leaving space between it and the wall. Bruno nodded silently. It's not like he had a choice anyways.

The pair of 'troubled' students now sit on their respective seats. While scanning through the classroom once again, Bruno flashes his vision onto Alex. As soon as he saw his friend, he guessed that this experience is a matter of discomfort to him. He was sweating, mindlessly gazing into the outer world, the emptiness in front of him, which Bruno noticed now is because McRyan went off somewhere once he and his leader arrived. The young boy now feeling the rushing heartbeat of his friend, the ruminating thoughts. Shivering, he stared down at his faux wooden table.

Bruno had only realized this now… This moment must be embarrassing for every student, no matter who… Except for a purposeful troublemaker. Being sent away to a different class because of a small action you committed. And in this case, Alex supposedly wasn't even attempting to be the perpetrator, but Bruno wasn't fully into the idea that his leader was innocent. Still, pain was still there. Alex was no small, ordinary student either. He was the class *leader*, and everyone knows that. And from what Bruno might have assessed, Alex must be a top student due to his high logical thinking skills, his intelligence. He's respected enough to be listened to while his classmates were in panic. How can't this situation affect him?

If anyone was truly hurt, it had to be Alex, for Bruno was just a laughed off, nobody, ordinary newcomer. Yes, he was a class prince, but he's still a *newbie*. What made matters worse is that his father was the one who punished him. It stung Bruno when just thinking about it.

All of a sudden, he briefly heard Alex muttering under his breath some words he couldn't piece together… But he knew it was made of words of pure embarrassment. Now, Bruno caught the feeling too. "*Yikes!*" he cried to himself.

"Aye, it's fine," a student called. It was the same one—Mercury. His smug face strangely didn't rub off on the newcomer. "Even the best students get punished. Case in point: The person sitting next to me." Although it was from a distance, and Bruno might've not heard it due to all the chatting in the background, he giggled. "Oh? Even back then?" he questioned soon after.

Mercury nodded. "Yep, and I was one of the causes. Actually, my friends too." A subtle wink came by, leading Bruno to snicker even more.

"Don't mind him. He's a big talker, Mercury," Alex snorted. Bruno noticed the boy in the back rolling his eyes. Perhaps Alex had hoped for his soul to leave he flame-colored boy's body.

In the midst of the chattering were some undistinguished murmurs regarding where McRyan went. While that was a question flooding Bruno's mind, he couldn't care less anymore. Really, he felt more interesting in doubling down Alex's opinions on him.

Paying attention to the seat neighborhood across him, he noticed Mercury jostling himself to view a brown-clothed boy who was sitting right in front of him. Among the storm of conversations, Mercury's conversation with this student is actually one of them. Bruno couldn't make out a word they're saying when their

sentences were swimming in the ocean of others' speeches, but he could sort of tell it was about him and Alex. This conclusion came from the peer glancing at him before returning to Mercury, his eyes now clearer than ever.

Finally, his head swiftly looked at Bruno and Alex, at the same time and motion as Mercury. "Hey, what really happened? Like, I know your father could've gotten you here, it's obvious. But what exactly happened that got *both* of you here?" the boy asked, almost sounding discriminating to Alex's perspective. "From the sounds of it, it's almost like you broke a school rule or something. Not something like you, Alex," he added after a couple of seconds.

That last sentence diminished Alex's calmness that he barely had moments before. His hands now shuffling in the tabletop. "It's not! It's not, and we all know it, believe me!" he denied continuously, not even holding back any yells.

Then, crashing in, was McRyan, who came to the scene as soon as he entered the room. "What's this nonsense going on!?" he screamed profusely, agitated at the sight of students having a discussion. "Talking as I'm present in the class? Perhaps that's the rule broken that got you here!"

Bruno tried to snarl, but told himself not to. He wanted to save his friend so badly, but that's what got him to Class 1 in the first place.

"I-I'm so sorry, McRyan!" Alex's attitude turned as soft as his vocals.

Before he was about to say anything else, McRyan slammed his hand into the table. "What a disappointment you're becoming—And it's only the first day!"

Alex shivered; it was abundantly clear to Bruno. Afterwards, he dipped his head down to stare at his feet, ashamed of even looking at the now narrow-eyed teacher. Deep down, Bruno was shocked to the core, but he knew saying nothing was better. If he did speak up… Well, he can only imagine the shallow consequences.

The brown boy chimed in. "Oh, McRyan, he—"

"And Bruno… Bruno…" McRyan growled, ignoring his student. His whole body shifted to face the newcomer. Bruno was visibly shaken, he could almost produce tears. "I know you're new—"

A cut-off came by from the slam of a door.

"Hey, sorry to interrupt anything, but I've got a message that a student here is going home… Donatello Oliver," the student seemed unsure as he announced, as if he was speaking another language.

Donatello led out a quiet cheer. “That should be me!” While Donatello was grinning, everyone stared in envy, especially Bruno who wished to leave and never come back to just this specific classroom.

“How sudden…” McRyan hissed.

“I know, but I’m just a mere messenger, that’s all,” the student raised his hands in the air while stating.

McRyan seemed threatening, his grimace making his emotions clear. “I know. I know *very well*.”

Despite the daunting tension rising, Donatello had an upbeat attitude as he skipped along to the door, carrying his comically heavy bag. “Adios everyone! Have fun dealing with the Class 2 nerds, especially you McRyan!” he waved as he whistled and went. The other student grinned awkwardly, then followed, slowly closing the door with a noticeable creak.

Bruno suddenly realized something. He might’ve heard the name before, but that name—McRyan… “Huh. Doesn’t your name ring a bell?” A whisper could be heard as he was talking to himself. However, the teacher heard it, rotating his neck to view the student.

“Shush your mouth, Bruno. Zip it!” he snapped. “And listen to me. Go and sit at Donatello's seat. I've caught wind of yours and Alex's friendship and I don't want such things to disrupt my class! You get me?”

The blue-ridden boy groaned loudly, making himself clear. “Alright.”

Bruno reluctantly approached the empty seat. It wasn’t as dusty as the seat he was previously sitting in. Nudging himself in, he poked his eyes around the room and kept finding students staring at him back, instantly looking away, sweating as soon as he caught them. A spike of discomfort struck him.

When he turned his head to see his seat partner, he met the eyes of an excitable individual—a girl who was as blue as him. She had pitch black hair, divided into two long pigtails with an indigo band. In a lighter shade was a shirt with a heart etched into it. Topping everything off was her face. Wearing cyan eye-shadow and deep ocean eyes. Uncomfortable, Bruno grinned while subtly shuddering. Inching a bit away from the girl, his attention had to be put somewhere.

And so it did as he watched McRyan approaching the chalkboard. Once he did reach his destination, his arm snapped as soon as he lifted his wrist to the writing on it. His expression as cold as ice. “Everyone! Copy that text down, *now*!” he ordered.

Soon enough, everyone followed. They jot down the note, every last bit of ink they had dedicating to it. When Bruno was dumbfounded and was a stone, McRyan seemed to have teleported to him, yelling “Even you too, Ray!” It was loud enough to crack the ordinary boy’s ears. The scare made him gulp out loud. Before dipping his head slightly, he twisted it to see his leader magically pulled out a sheet of paper out of thin air. Embarrassment struck him. He could feel, while looking at the ground with shame, that the strict teacher returned to the board.

A slight sigh pushed him to tap the blue-clothed girl’s shoulder. “Er, may I have a piece of paper?” he asked the girl.

She lit up, as if she was asked by a celebrity to take pictures of them. “Sure thing!” Pulling out an empty book out of her enormous bag, she found an empty notebook, about the size of the one she was writing in. After tearing a page, she handed it to her seat partner. “Thank you,” whispered Bruno. Knowing of the girl’s enthusiasm, she’d react in a certain way… But she didn’t.

“Don't forget any bit of what you've written down, even past the exams,” McRyan advised. His voice bellowed across the room, bouncing off every surface, including the student’s fearful ears, though fearful except one’s.

“Even when I'll be a rapper?” Harley, a member of the class far from Bruno, joked out. Laughter roared from everyone, the loudest being his seat partner—a girl with a pink attire, but very dreary hair. Bruno could see the pair right when his head twisted back to chuckle with the room.

“Shut your foolish mouth, Harley!” yelling came from McRyan. He was so frustrated that he brought out a piece of chalk stored on the teacher’s table and thrusted it into Harley’s table, creating a burst of a sound.

“Alright, alright…” Harley groaned, raising his hands up as if he’s caught in a crime scene.

After a growl from McRyan, something came upon him. A gasp. “Right! I forgot something!” he exclaimed. He turned his attention to the whole class once he reached the front of it, leaving the broken chalk on the student’s table. “ I completely forgot something crucial here,” he reiterated. “Please wait for a moment. Ryder, look after the class.” Ryder led out a moan. “Alright.”

McRyan walked off out of the class, nowhere to be seen by anyone. It only took a second until the students began to chatter about what Harley said. They all turned their heads to the boy, and if they could, they’d swarm to him like bees. Meanwhile,

Bruno was only left astray giggling as he didn't give anyone eye contact. His thoughts were littered with the rapper comment.

"Well, well, well!" he then heard a sudden voice. Immediately, he swiveled his head to find his seat partner, eager as ever to speak to him. "You must be Bruno Ray, right?"

Bruno shuffled his fingers flat on the table. "Oh, uh, yeah," he stammered.

"Nice to meet you! I'm Blue Junester. I've heard of you during break. Since then, I've been dying to meet you! But now here I am—on the first day no less!" Blue said followed by a laugh.

"First day and I've already got a fan, a crime to solve that might involve *murder*, being sent to another class *as punishment* and nearly *died*," Bruno blankly stated, followed by a deeply fake grin. "Incredible," the sarcasm seething in his expression. It was possibly a form of frustration.

"Mine was even worse when arriving here!" Blue exclaimed. "Guess what? I was stuck in the toilet for *three-fourths* of the day!"

While it wasn't obvious, Bruno sat in utter shock, his eyes gazing at the girl. "Wow! Is that so?" The enthusiasm rubbed off Blue. Bliss emanating from her skin. "Yeah, so I got to experience nothing! And I got badly injured. Had to skip school for a while after that. Who knew toilets were so harmful?"

The little story pried out Bruno's joyous laughter. It stormed so much, even Blue was infected with it. Of course, their bursts of giggles weren't as blasting as the classroom's collective ones. While Bruno was chuckling, he roughly opened his eyes to now see Blue, sitting and smiling, as if back to a default position of staring at the student. It was a comforting one, and one that seemed *too* comfortable for him. When he stopped, he began to notice that she was patiently waiting for him to stop so she could do something.

"By the way, have you heard of this rule?" she suddenly imposed a question.

The jolt of the sentence flickered Bruno's judgement. "Er, no," he stammered. "What rule?"

"That no student in this year can have any relationships from someone in class?"

A not-so-subtle blink came from Blue. Her eyes can't get off his. "Oh yeah. Yeah, my classmates told me," Bruno answered. An awkward giggle came about, not the same jubilant energy as before. Rather, one of discomfort.

Blue stared down at her table, drooping, not even looking at who's sitting beside her. Eyelids wide open, her sky eyeshadow now invisible, she said in a longing voice, "Well, I think it's an awful rule."

"Me too. I heard it's broken a lot," stated Bruno, accompanied with a nod of agreement. Blue lifted her head up, now glaring at her peer, there was fire in her eyes. "Yeah, it has! I know one of your classmates has. Sarah, right?" Bruno attempted to not make eye contact. "Mhm," he affirmed quietly, ignoring whose name was said completely.

Suddenly, Blue made herself comfortable by firmly setting her torso in the middle of her chair. After a soft adjustment, she instantly turned her head to view Bruno again. "Well, if you want to be friends, then don't be too worried about that rule. It only applies to romantic relationships. We can just be friends!" she shrugged.

The offer aroused Bruno. But at the same time, would he take such a risk?

It was at this moment that he realized that his instincts were right. Blue was trying her best to flirt with him. Blue wasn't just a fan—she had fallen for the ordinary boy! "Oh, I know that. But it's only been a few minutes that we've been talking," Bruno began to shake while saying. His head now kept searching for any possible away to avoid Blue's face. There was a mix of sweat and discontentment. His blush wasn't of a crush, but rather awkwardness of the realization. Of course, he was flattered, but he definitely wasn't in love with Blue. She was just a girl he just met, and even if they knew each other… She can't be his type. This was love at first sight anyways on her side.

"Right!" Blue smiled. Her newfound friend shifted his head slightly to her for a swift second before positioning it back to where it was, straight-on. Nevertheless, she didn't seem so bothered, rather blissful.

Then a familiar hiss came from behind them. "Blue…" It sounded awful.

"Oops, sorry Claire," Blue apologized, turned to the student behind her.

A wave of bitter nostalgia crashed onto him. "*Claire*!" Bruno repeated to himself in his brain. The pang of lost memories now striking him hard. His heart drummed even more frequently than when he discovered Blue's love for him.

After a surge of thoughts, Bruno turned his back to finally see… Claire. She had her typical blazing hair that adored him from such a bygone time. A bow to tie it off, a sweet pink outfit, a frilly skirt as outgoing as she once was. And of course… Those sapphire eyes that pulled in the young boy's affection.

"Pain's grin! It *is* Claire…" Bruno whispered under his breath.

Claire narrowed his eyes on him. “Well, well, well, waddaya look at that. Bruno Lively Ray,” she snorted. “Never thought I’d see you alive again, especially in this place.”

Blue gasped loudly. “You guys know each other!?” While Blue sounded so surprised and eager to learn, Bruno knew it all. Everything that would stun his new friend was old news to him. “*Knew* each other, Bluey,” snarled Claire, trying her best to not even look at Bruno.

“The two of us used to be such good friends before—”

“Before *you* messed everything up!”

Bruno swallowed, almost like attempting to swallow his guilt. “He is somebody that I used to know, Bluey,” Claire added. Silence came by from Bruno. All he could do was freeze. He was so caught up, that he felt like he couldn’t even write about what happened. If he could, it would take a whole novel to do so. That’s how he felt.

At the drop of a hat, the door shoved itself open or rather pushed by the oncoming teacher—Wayne McRyan. His neck shifted around the room before fully stepping across the border between the class and outside. Revealed to have accompanied him is a plant. It must’ve been why he left.

The plant in question was strange, certainly unnatural. It was shaped as if it was a fusion between a Venus Flytrap, a cactus and a bonsai tree, though its spiky thorns are curved, yet moving up and down, indicating that it’s breathing. With the thorns running across it, it had a long way to go as it was skinny, its ends reaching far. Tall. Then, the classroom suddenly saw some swift motion and swooshing sounds. It wasn’t from McRyan… It was from the miniature tree!

Placing flat on the surface of the teacher’s desk, McRyan then grasped a stern look at everyone before inhaling to announce, “Students, this plant... Is a half-alive plant, named simply as "Stemlung" though its scientific name is Vivum Terratum.” Plotting the pot wasn’t easy. The plant, now known to Bruno as Stemlung, kept trying to escape, though it unfortunately couldn’t. No legs means no moving out of its soil cage! The flicker of a hand wave could soon be heard, from the column across Bruno.

“Professor McRyan, what do you mean it's half-alive? All plants are living things,” the student asked out of Bruno’s eyeshot.

“Good question, Miss Felts,” McRyan grinned, finally finishing his mission of maintaining the pot. “You see, what I mean by "half-alive" is that it's half-"aware.” It's a plant with awareness in the level of a human or an animal, depending on its age from what I've observed. The older it is, the smarter it gets, just like you lot.” A tone of bitterness was sensed. “Cool!” someone exclaimed in the background.

Once Bruno turned his head to see the other students, he had begun to catch someone starting to speak. “Meh. I don't know... Isn't it kind of creepy?” the pupil seemed hesitant while asking. Considering the fact that it had bristled teeth and that it was actively moving, it was certain to be a cause of concern.

A roar came from the seat in front of Bruno. “And it even looks like one of those carnivorous plants!” they jeered. It was a girl with a meadow green jacket and dark brown hair. To her complete end on the right, he heard even more snarls. “Yeah! Gross!”

“It’s fine, kids!” McRyan roared, passionate about the piece of vegetation.

“No way. That plant looks like it killed millions,” Bruno whispered, trying to hold back a snicker. Blue nodded. “Yep,” she silently agreed.

Bruno had goosebumps. Not about the flashing plant, no, it’s about Claire. She was sitting behind him, and he could very well feel her watching him. Glaring. Narrowing her eyes, almost like slits. He knew that if he turned to see her, she’d get what she wanted—the satisfaction of seeing him regret his actions. It was obvious whenever his eyes met hers. Yet, he won’t give her that. Instead, he turned back to check on Alex.

His friend seemed to be as hung up on someone as Bruno, unless the plant kept him at a trance too like it did to other students. Deep down, he felt like the class leader was stuck on someone. Before he knew it, when turning his head to perceive the columns adjacent to him, he could tell that Alex was staring at the girl who questioned about the plant’s sentience. Did they know each other? It was certain that the two Class 2 members were puzzled.

Perplexing thoughts flew through Bruno’s mind as he thrusted himself back to his table. His gaze now fixed on the plant. Sweating, he thought, “Is this seriously what we're going to face later? It's literally the first day too! I bet Nadia's going to be scared to bits.”

Suddenly, he woke himself up at the snap of McRyan’s daunting, low voice. It was certainly an experience, listening to the biology teacher.

“Well, Mr. Applewood. Since you're the first one who commented, how about I test you here?” McRyan suggested, although it almost sounded like a threat.

Of course, Applewood went into a frenzy. His body trembling, shivering at the mere thought of his hand contacting the prickly plant. “Wh-what?!” Stutters crashed through. “M-Mr. M-McRyan!”

Applewood’s cries meant nothing when McRyan firmly positioned the potted plant on his table. The boy flickered his head up and down, looking at his teacher as if he was insane. The girl who Alex was interested in turned her back to view the plant, now in full detail.

“Wow! Can I study it?” she asked. Indeed, instead of fear, she stared at it in pure intrigue.

“No, Shelby! Let your peer do the job on his own,” McRyan roared.

Beside Applewood, there were jeers from his seat partner, a girl wrapped in a teal jacket. She backed away from it as best as she could. “Yuck!” she growled. She glanced at Shelby who was obviously interested, proposing, “Can I sit where you are instead? I don’t want this thing next to me!” Her demanding voice wasn’t needed, as Shelby didn’t even hesitate at all. “Sure!” she agreed.

They swapped places as if they were playing a game of musical chairs. McRyan snarled, as expected. “Shelby!”

“It’s fine. Shelby’s… great… Can she do it, please Wayne?” Applewood pleaded, his eyes wide.

“Don't *simply* call me Wayne.” McRyan hissed loudly.

“Mr… McRyan,” Applewood corrected himself, stuttering and shuddering.

McRyan narrowed his eyes at the young boy, almost as if they were slits. He could feel the horror of his student, yet he didn’t seem to care all that much. As a matter of fact, it could fuel his cold, heckling ways. “I won't even listen to what you're about to say, boy. Just pet it. It won't even bite that harshly,” he shouted.

Applewood turned his head from eyeing his teacher to tearing up at the sight of the Stemlung. It was snapping, bellowing for attention. “Alright…” quietly sighed Applewood.

Soon enough, his sight was set on closely examining the plant. Bruno didn’t get to see it well, thanks to McRyan blocking half of it, but he could see that its flower didn’t have petals. Instead, it was replaced by something that resembled a bear trap, not too far off from the appearance of a Venus Flytrap. And as he had once thought earlier, its bottom was as spiky and now as waxy as a cactus. It certainly

wasn't any ordinary plant… It had to be rare! Meanwhile, Applewood was getting increasingly concerned, for he continued to search for a good spot to "pet it" since its stem was spiky. The most tolerable parts were probably deep in the dirt.

"Uhm… McRyan, where should I—"

"Pet it?" McRyan snapped at the student. "Figure it out. It's obvious."

Applewood let out a hefty gulp. "Al… Alright."

Bruno could finally see now… McRyan stook a couple steps towards his table to see what was fully going on in front of him. Dangerously curious, the class members certainly wanted to see if the plant truly was brutal or if it was all in their head. When Applewood, at once, touched the base of the Stemlung, he could feel its smooth texture. Soothing as rubbing soap. It comforted everyone, then suddenly…

"YOUCH!" Applewood screamed!

The Stemlung had bitten his other hand!

The shriek continued as his peers joined in with the fear. People banged their hands on the table as if the sounds could startle it, but it didn't work. Bruno knew it couldn't do anything. The acute teeth of the plant couldn't stop at plunging at the poor student's hands… It could've slashed his wrist! Tears started flowing out. Everyone's heart rates started rising. *Someone had to do something!*

"PAIN'S GRIN, POPS!" Candace wallowed.

"MOTHER!" Pearl added.

Wilson, the student previously sitting next to Shelby, turned his head straight at her. She seemed as worried as everyone else, perhaps more than anyone else. "Shell, d-do something!" he stammered.

Shelby's panicked rush of thoughts swallowed her. Rustling around, she tried to find something around the Stemlung to provoke it, then she thought of a simple idea.

The pot started to nudge out. Indeed, Shelby, with all her might and strength, started to pull the adamant plant. It didn't let go of Applewood's hand, however, still hanging on to it. When Shelby finished pulling the pot and forced it to let go of Applewood, Wilson and Candace backed away as far as they caught away from the pot as the girl set it apart from her. This caused a domino effect, as the two tables in front of them started to move away too. Then she noticed it, along with Bruno at the flashing moment.

Applewood's hand was bleeding! Scratched from when the Stemlung's fangs couldn't let go of it. Being pulled extended the scar's length.

“Oh, Pops! I am so sorry… I-I should’ve removed it another way,” she apologized swiftly.

Applewood gazed around for a bit before focusing on his temporary seat partner. A small smile jolted out. “It’s fine, it’s fine. The nurses can easily cure it.”

Wishful thinking, it was, at least to Bruno. The wound wasn’t deep, but it sure was bloody. Two strips of red ran across the middle of the dorsal surface of his hand. Bruno could feel Blue behind him, flinching, her jaw dropping.

McRyan crashed through the slight distance between the first table and the teacher’s tables, squeezing with his slim hips. “Pops, it's insanely easy to recognize where to pet a plant, especially a Stemlung,” yelled the biology teacher. A bang on the table came. It was from McRyan’s own palms, almost making the potted plant jump. “Why are you having such a hard time!?”

“I've *never* dealt with it!” protested Applewood.

“Your parents *never* have?” the teacher soon asked, as if everyone had experienced it.

“None of our parents have, actually…” said Norman, a student sitting in the front, chimed in, almost wanting to whisper it.

“It should be obvious since we, oh I don't know, all look surprised?” Pearl sounded frustrated while asking.

McRyan kept searching, possibly for a student who’d side with him… But nobody did. Not even the one student who he’d know would do so. “It’s true!” Alex called out. It caught the teacher’s attention, turning his head to the end of the room. As expected, the yellow-clothed boy was shaken as McRyan stared into the pupil’s soul. He snorted, “Maybe I'll warn your clan tomorrow when I visit them, Alex.” Despite its tone… It could very well be a threat for speaking out. Nonetheless, Bruno knew what he was expecting tomorrow morning. A hardy biology lesson. Was it because of him and his friends? He didn’t know.

McRyan turned around, not giving any more of his face towards Alex. “Your lot is more foolish than this class!” he roared, possibly also informing the Class 1 students. Not seems half-bothered, however. Instead, Shelby was still stuck on the pot on her table.

“McRyan, send Pops to the hospital before the bleeding gets worse!” she advised urgently.

McRyan twisted his torso around again. “He'll be fine. The skin damage isn't that bad, and it’s *definitely* not poisonous,” he brushed off, scoffing after.

Finally, the straw had broken the camel’s back to Bruno. Those sentences set his mind off. He made it pretty clear at that point that he truly doesn’t care about his own student’s safety. He made it clear that he only brought this plant to cause pain, or perhaps to experiment its effects on innocent students, traumatizing bystanders like Bruno himself. That was *nothing* to scoff at!

For what felt like the first time, Bruno slammed his fists on his table, almost plunging himself to stand up. He stayed still to control himself. “No, it isn't, but it can still really harm him!” screamed the young by. McRyan turned his back on Shelby and Applewood, now holding his gaze at Bruno. Before he was going to say something, the student continued. “You're the *biology* teacher. Everyone would assume you'd be the one to understand safety. It’s above *anything* in this subject, but I guess it isn’t to you.”

Bruno finally felt like he was flushing out his thoughts that he felt like he was forced to call off. “I know you don't know anything about the Brooklyn branch, but it was not like this! Teachers don't just leave their injured students in class because of a mistake they made! It's just…” he paused to think about a perfect word. “Cruel.” A grimace came by. “And besides, Pops didn't make that big of a mistake. Who would've known that plant could bite him?”

Blue’s determined voice dashed forward. “Not even the Voyants could predict that!” Bruno had no clue what that statement meant, but he knew that she was defending him. He had no energy to comment. Now he was committed to taking the biology teacher down. But on the flip side… The teacher in question groaned. “Oh, Bruno!”

The young boy deep down knew that he was the last person McRyan wanted to encounter, let down arguing with. Even Bruno himself didn’t want to deal with him. He didn’t know why, though. A sinking feeling deep down told him that it was something important. Still, his eyes were on fire, wishing to stand up for a peer who was hurting.

“How about you take the plant then?” McRyan asked, twirling his fingers. He swiftly tilted his head towards Applewood. “Mr. Applewood... Just go to the hospital.” A growl could be heard afterwards. Whimpering, Applewood stammered, “A-Alright.” Hurdling his way through the classroom, Applewood passed everyone

like a wimp. Bruno half-expected people to laugh… But nobody did. They were evidently stuck horrified of the teacher instead.

Upon turning his attention to his seat, Bruno immediately heard the sudden bang of the Stemlung's pot contacting his table. There, he finally saw it in clear view—the plant that scratched a student's hand. A sinking feeling almost weight Bruno down. It felt like stones gravitating his shoulders. Yet, he kept to his heart's promise of helping a student. Bruno could feel Blue behind him, making her chair screech as it was pushed backwards by the force of her legs. Then, other students followed.

"Now, why don't *you* try to handle it?" McRyan asked as if he was speaking to a child. "Here, feed it this." Soon enough, the teacher gripped to his coat's pocket, reaching out two slices of bananas that were softly tossed into Bruno's table, added by a dash of tiny strawberries. As curious as he was, Bruno stared at the fruits. They were full of the same flesh as Stemlung, except a Stemlung's "flesh" is much more akin to a human's… Still, it was a plant. The realization caused the boy to slightly flinch. "A plant eating a plant? Weird cannibalism," he muttered to himself discreetly.

Finally, he managed to get the guts to feed the Stemlung. Its biting teeth now didn't seem so blunt to Bruno. Even so, Bruno kept his fear at bay as he slowly gave it the food. Once it seemed to have sensed its feast, the Stemlung plummeted to grab the fruits, somehow not even meeting Bruno's palm, only focusing on its meal that it couldn't get out of Applewood.

Once Bruno could get the chance to, once and for all, give a good look at the piece of nature, he could recognize that it just wanted to survive, and being treated as if it was a part of some lab test wasn't right for it. It just isn't in its blood to handle the cackles of a seeming crowd of juveniles. Bruno then peeked straight into McRyan's jet black pupils, knowing the pang of dread yet shock that he was experiencing.

Daring to infuriate his teacher more, Bruno decided to defy anyone's expectations, deciding to grapple with his hand towards the base of the Stemlung. However, like Applewood, he couldn't for the plant turned back to its violent side, aiming to bite his hand like the student before him did. Luckily, Bruno could dodge it, his palm quick enough to do so.

Still a fire burning inside his heart, Bruno searched vigorously for a way to somehow pet the plant, to prove everyone wrong. The desire sure seemed to have

intrigued McRyan. At this point, Bruno had expected the teacher to snatch the pot away, but he didn't. After searching through the soggy soil, through the waxy flesh of the stem, to even the bristle leaves, Bruno felt he had no option until he spotted something notable. The Stemlung's trap could drop down and move around like an axe, somewhat more flexible than a human's head, its stem acting like a bending neck. Despite this, it couldn't turn back, only staring upward, downward and left to right in front of it. A bright bulb came to the young boy's mind.

Of course! It had flashed.

Bruno, with all his nerve, moved his hand forward, making his palm feel the now silky texture of the stem, and the underside of the trap. For the first time, the plant appeared relaxed. Its trap now not willing to bite anymore, only relishing in the pure touch from the student.

The whole room gasped, including McRyan. "Sick!" a student in front of Bruno exclaimed.

Blue moved towards Bruno and the potted plant, inching towards the friendly version of it, somehow avoiding making any noise. A voice of awe squealed. "Oh mother!" A bright smile came about. Suddenly, she beamed her eyes at the brooding biology teacher, locking it. Then came a blaze of questions. "McRyan, does it talk? Make any sort of noise?"

McRyan had noticed at this point that tinges of an energy burst had infected everyone. Obviously bothered, he scoffed at it all—and it was a loud obvious one. "Let's not have *too* much fun," he groaned.

Once Bruno had heard those words, he let his palms and fingers go of the plant. Expectedly, McRyan dragged the pot out of the surface of the table, keeping its distance between it and Bruno as far as the Earth and Moon. A huge scowl was worn on his miserable face, and oh he showed it well on his own pupil. Only for a second did he want to see the slight dissatisfaction in the student's face. Sadly, for him, it didn't come. All he could do was lift the pot down to his elbow level and roll his dirty eyes.

For one last time, Bruno gazed at the unused fruits, then back at McRyan. "Hey, maybe you should've given Pops those fruits?" he suggested.

"No," McRyan shot down instantly.

The teacher strolled towards his table, holding the pot, trying to keep its trap away from biting his angled forward nose. It was blatant to see that the Stemlung wanted to be back with Bruno. McRyan didn't listen. *So much for being a biology teacher*.

McRyan firmly set the plant on his wooden base, followed by standing tall in front of everyone. He started, "Now, these plants don't last as long as we do. They can live as long as seven years, but usually, they last as long as a not so fickle friendship: eight years."

After giving another short glance at it, he stared blankly at everyone again. "Otherwise, these plants are just like us and other animals, evolving creatures made by Mother. And just like us, it spreads to other countries."

While explaining, he began to draw something on the board—the Brazilian flag. "Stemlungs originated in Brazil as one of the Amazon rainforest's greatest wonders. Since its discovery in the 1960s, it has become a household name. In the 1990s, it became legal to own this plant. Because of its popularity and domestication, it, like cats and dogs, has begun to breed and grow in other countries. The state of New York is—"

The bell had begun to sing. Finally, it was the end of the torturous lesson… And it was 15 minutes?

"A state known for the ever-increasing growing population of these peculiar plants…" McRyan groaned deeply, his soul getting out of his body. "And it seems like the class is over."

Everyone had cheered in unison. It *did* feel like it took forever, at least to Bruno. He can't imagine how the first actual lesson with McRyan will be like!

The students got out together, for it was the first lunch period that Bruno will experience… And it was after a lesson with another class. A huge crowd was flying by together, buzzing bees. But Bruno could sense that those slight murmurs were having him as the center point. Soon enough, it was confirmed to them as they all realized that he was walking with them. Their eyes now meeting his own.

A particular student that he had spoken to earlier, the one who was asking about what circumstances got him and Alex there in the first place, began to slow down his walking to catch up with Bruno's, who was being left behind with his class leader. It almost seemed like he was walking backwards.

"Hey! Bruno, right?" he greeted awkwardly.

Bruno grinned, his white teeth shining in the luster of the artificial lights. "Yeah," he confirmed.

A chuckle came from the student. “Well, what you did there was marvelous. Even a class such as us was impressed. Standing up for a student from another class...”

“Wait, nobody does that in this school?!” Bruno suddenly exclaimed, utterly flabbergasted. “That’s awful!” adding in his last sentence with a cry.

Another student entered the conversation—Shelby. “We can’t afford divided loyalties,” she stated. “… Unlike some other people here,” her eyes narrowed on Alex, the boy darting his irises away. But Bruno’s focus was trapped on Blue, who was worried while walking beside him and between him and her own friends which clique included Claire. Bruno remembered what she said earlier, about the rule. Now he understood, but not entirely.

“Who cares about class loyalty?” he questioned.

Then came another student, who he did spot earlier but didn’t note down as a peculiar student. “It's essential for the survival of the class system,” argued the boy walking in front, eyeing him for a second.

Bruno had a shallow sigh while slightly kicking his toes during a step. “... If you think that's true, so be it. I guess I need to learn the ways.” Acceptance might’ve been the impression he gave to the traditional Class 1 students, but in reality, he couldn’t care less.

“Of course you do,” the student Bruno knew from earlier told him with pure insistence. “But I appreciate your out of the box perspective on things, Bruno. I could tell by how you handled touching that trap plant.” A grin soon rose. “I'm Ryder, leader of Class 1, by the way!” Bruno expected a handshake, but of course, they were walking, there wasn’t a chance for such pleasantries.

“Is that why you and Alex were talking casually before?” Bruno asked.

Ryder nodded happily, then followed by an affirmative Alex. “Indeed so.”

Then Ryder moved forward, now suddenly in front of everyone. “Now come on, class, we need to hurry quick before everything gets too cold!” The students rapidly went one by one, then as a union to the cafeteria… Among the swarm was, as he hoped he couldn’t see, Claire. Her eyes slitted on him as she slowly followed her friends. “I’m keeping my eyes on you, *loser*,” she hastily retorted to him. After a deep frown, she sprinted, following her peers.

Bruno reciprocated the pinch of fury she felt. “I’m *not* a loser,” he mumbled.

Not noticing Alex turning his cheeks red, the two went off to see their actual classmates in the cafeteria, not rushing as much as the Class 1 members.

Chapter 11
Mathematical Mystery

Finally, it's lunchtime. All the classes sat and peacefully ate at their tables… As peacefully as they could. Throughout the forty minutes, Bruno could feel the tension among the four classes. Class 3 and 4 were always staring down while Class 1 and 2 didn't seem to be any better. One thought circulated around Bruno's mind, "Why are they so adamant on being so divided? It isn't even about loyalty anymore…" It was a genuine question… And one even Alex can't answer.

There were faces Bruno couldn't ignore. Aster, Blossom and their clique of friends were some of them. Others were the more friendly faces in the form of his sweet classmates who were glad he and their leader managed to survive Class 1 and the Stemlung. Almost too glad!

"You're lucky that Venus Flytrap didn't eat your face!" Nadia cried as she squeezed Bruno's cheeks. He groaned. "It's a Stemlung and we might face it tomorrow," the youngsters exchanged perplexed glances, as if they heard an alien speak. "What even is a *Stemlung*?" Spencer asked.

Suddenly, Max started to shake himself. While it could be shivering from the cold, his movement looked more erratic. Then, out of the blue, a picture comes out from his eyes! It was of a Stemlung, one strikingly similar to the one Class 1 faced. "Vivum Terratum, or the Stemlung," he started robotically, "is a carnivorous plant that is half-alive, meaning that it's only active particularly when it's hungry."

"There you go," Alex pointed out nonchalantly. But while everyone seemed to have thought of Max's photo projection to be normal, it definitely wasn't to Bruno!

"What was that, Max?!" Bruno exclaimed.

"Oh! I'm a robot. You don't know that?" Max chuckled while asking like it's obvious. Bruno shook his head swiftly.

"You really don't know us! Khe khe khe!" cackled Renard as he seemingly teleported next to Bruno. Before he knew it, Renard transformed into him!

"You can shapeshift!?" Bruno was in even more of a shock here.

“Renard is a descendant of a famous Greek magician… A genuine one,” Alex explained. “Their powers are all inherited.” Renard transforms into Alex and adjusts his newly-formed into glasses. “Er, yes, yes. That is so true. Yes, yes.” Such mockery, it was. The class king was in the brink of punching one of his own subjects.

“How about you, Max? Who created you?” Bruno asked softly as to not upset his peer. As expected, he huffed and tried his best to not look at his friends. “I don’t know. I’ve always thought it was my parents, Andrew, or Andy, and Tina Lopez. They’re also parents of Laurel Lopez over there in Class 1.” During the explanation, he pointed to Laurel who was mingling with the other Team Toxic members like Aster and Blossom, obviously one of their putrid members. But strangely enough, Bruno narrowed his eyes hard enough to recognize her.

“Laurel… I know her!” Bruno declared. “She was a member of my old branch. She was friends with one of my old friends from The Sunnys!”

Max didn’t seem so shocked. “That makes sense. I had to stay with my father here in Manhattan after his… conflicts with my mother while my siblings moved with her to Brooklyn. Recently, Laurel and her brother joined this branch again because, well, for the same reason you decided to come here.”

Bruno felt tempted to talk to her again while the robot was talking. But he quit it. Max shrugged as he could sort of tell how he was feeling.

The ordinary boy glared around his class’s lunch table as everyone was lively, having chats with each other. Either intellectual speeches, catching up with others or petty gossip. He had a funny sinking feeling inside of him that weighed him down. Maybe it was true, what he always tells himself. He isn’t so special… He has a shapeshifter, a robot, literal geniuses and maybe even a rumored ghost with him. And him? Well, he’s nothing.

Then, a familiar girl had approached him… A girl he saw earlier that day who isn’t in his class. No, it isn’t Blossom or Blue, it’s Claire! As soon as he put eyes on her, Bruno squeaked in a quiet gasp.

“Well, it’s nice seeing you around again, Bruno,” Claire hissed.

The other Class 2 students sweated as they don’t want to cause actual conflict between them and Class 1 with Claire’s presence, so they kept quiet and let Bruno handle this himself. This includes Alex. He continued to just eat out of his lunchbox.

“Hi, Claire,” Bruno grinned, pretending like she’s a true stranger to him.

“Do you still miss me?” That question hit Bruno like a sledgehammer. It was quite out of left field! “Or are you really better off with that king friend of yours?”

“What? I mean, maybe, but I’ve really only known him for a day by now!” answered Bruno, trying not to stumble his words. He panned his look at Alex who didn’t have any thoughts in his head.

“Besides, you’re the one who came up with the breakup words, not me. I didn’t want to call things off,” Bruno started to argue.

“Oh? Me? Is it really my fault when you kept being so petty with your friends?”

“I know what I did was wrong to Dexter, the others understand too. We moved on. Heck, I bet Dexter moved on too… Why can’t you?” Bruno’s words sounded like pleading to the bow-filled lass. While it could be the truth, denial is much sweeter. “You suck anyways,” she spat.

Bruno scoffed. “Did you seriously come all the way here just to tell me that?”

She didn’t even answer back. All she did was flip her hair, nearly smacking Bruno’s smooth nose, and moved onwards to her table.

Alex shut his lunchbox tightly and it was a bang, then he stared at Bruno who returned the look. “That ex you got there sure is something else,” Alex whistled. “What? Do you like her!?” Bruno screamed. Alex shook his head. “Oh, no. I’m just saying that she’s crazy. Don’t come back to her if you’re tempted to do that.”

The advice was solid for him… But is it going to be easy to follow?

That whole time Bruno did believe that she wanted to tell him something more but she was too scared too. Of course, he has a nasty tendency to come up with delusions after heartbreak.

After lunch it turns to math. One pleasurable subject… To a dreaded one, at least to Bruno.

All twenty students arrived at the same time. Expectedly, a huge crowd came about trying to enter through the miniature door. For some time, Bruno had to stand awkwardly behind everyone before they all could peacefully take their seats. And at once, the teacher storms in—Albert Gunther.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Gunther,” the students chanted in harmony.

“Good afternoon, children,” Albert greeted back with a new muffled voice Bruno never heard before.

Albert was a peculiar looking man. He was tall, scrawny, his head almost always leaning forward. Strands of gelled gray hair were mixed with the messy black on the back. A moustache was wrapped on top of his mouth and nearly covering his nose. The cherry on top of his face were his rectangular glasses. Below it all were a smoky suit and scarlet tie.

"How have your summers been?" he immediately asked.

There were murmurs that were possibly answers, but Bruno believed most were just ignoring him.

"Alright…" the teacher whispered to himself. "Let's not waste any time. It may be the first day of school, but it doesn't mean we can't do anything. So, let's start with some simple equations you may have learned last year!"

Albert began to turn back, pulled out his chalk and jotted some numbers and symbols on the board. It was such speedy writing since he finished it at the snap of a finger! "Students, note these questions down. Answer it on your paper and show it to me," he instructed. Pulling out a sheet of paper he kept in the bag he brought to class, he circulated around the class to distribute it. "Don't fear any mistakes or judgement from me. I just want to assess your knowledge on mathematics."

Once the paper landed on Bruno, he kept exchanging glances with the chalkboard. There was a mix of simultaneous equations and geometry questions. While Bruno was better at the latter, he can't deny that he's pretty useless in the subject in general. Very unfortunate for the situation he was in!

And what made matters worse: Bruno shifted his focus to Alex and watched as his seat partner wasted no time solving these (complex to him) questions. That made him shiver and inadequate. "Yeesh…" Bruno quietly groaned to himself. He tried his best to avoid even looking at his other peers for he knew that they were doing *something* as he could hear pencils chattering away.

More gazing at the chalkboard, more critical thinking needed. Bruno had forgotten everything he learned!

Albert eventually arrived at Bruno's table, although he was more so staring at Alex's paper rather than the blue boy's. A face of awe rose up from the ancient man's face.

"Impressive, but I shouldn't be so surprised," Albert said. "You have always been such an outstanding pupil."

Alex nodded in respect but not looking at his superior. Instead, leaving his focus only on what's in front of his nose.

Albert finally searched through Bruno's paper, but there was barely anything! "Er?" he stammered. That made Bruno turn absolutely red! "Do you need help? You can ask your friend here!"

Alex moaned then dug his head even more towards the paper.

"I *will* figure it out, Mr. Gunther. Don't worry!" Bruno assured, followed by a fake giggle that didn't impress the math teacher. "There is nothing to be ashamed of," the man told his student once more. But Bruno only bit his tongue after rolling his eyes. "But fine. Just don't make so much noise, though I suppose you already aren't," Albert snapped.

And so, the scrawny man left the scene, moving on to Nadia and Bella. Only mother knows how many times Bruno will hear his name from the former.

Bruno glued his eyes to his paper once more. Laying on the ground as if it was sleeping, waiting and dreaming for it to be written on… It seems like those dreams would stay a dream though as Bruno can't even think straight anymore—especially after everything that happened the past hour. Suddenly, a knock came from Alex, then a thud to Bruno's shoulder. It was from the same boy, his seat partner.

"What?" Bruno snapped.

Alex shook his head. "I see that you don't have a calculator. You can borrow mine."

Bruno grunted loudly. "Are you serious? I need some help here!"

"Ask for it," Alex spat back.

"Fine," Bruno moaned. "Can you help me do this… Area equation?"

Alex smiled almost maliciously. "Of course. You see, it's super easy."

After adjusting his glasses, the class king whipped up his pencil from the void that is under his table and launched it on Bruno's table. Soon enough, he started to note down the expression needed to calculate the area of the quadrilateral shape.

"You have the height and these two lengths. You do know the formula for the area of this shape, yes?"

After squinting, Bruno just now noticed what shape he just doodled… "Trapezoid…" he whispered subtly to himself. His head held up. "Er, maybe?"

Alex noted it down just in case. "It's half of the two lengths added multiplied by the height." His partner eagerly nodded, pretending to understand. "Now to build the expression, you can use the formula and…"

At this point, Bruno zoned out and only registered Alex's speech as pure white noise just like all the murmurs from his classmates. Math has never made sense to

poor Bruno, although when does it ever to anyone but seemingly Alex? Anyhow, he has to act like he has to like it all the time.

"Are you listening!?" Alex yelped.

Bruno woke up from being lost in thought, then blankly gazed at his seat partner. "Yeah," he softly lied.

"Well, you can solve the next question on your own now. I don't want to waste my time explaining something that any student who reached this grade should know," Alex sarcastically said as he was dropping a pen to Bruno's table, indicating he was well and done. Bruno had a shallow smile, then instantly gripped the pen to the paper, acting like he was into the subject once more.

"Right… So what Alex did…" Bruno thought to himself, narrowing his eyes down to every ink that drew a number. Almost puking in disgust of what he had to do. "That's right," he kept repeating to himself. Finally, he jotted down the answer to the next question. However, in the midst of calculating in his brain, he began to speak the answers and his thought processes out loud.

"The brackets should replace A, then this should be here…"

The mumbles from Bruno got clearer and clearer as he pieced together an answer, totally not copying from Alex's hard work. Albert eventually arrived as a part of another round of checking his pupils. He found Alex awkwardly sitting as he had not only completed all the questions but also watched his partner trying to solve such trivial questions (to him) in pure amusement. With the hopeless eyes of the gifted student, Albert stared even further at Bruno's sheet, though even more repulsed by how blaring his speech is.

"Bruno!" Albert called out under his facial hair. That made Bruno snap his neck as he was turning it. "What are you doing?"

"Solving the questions on my own," Bruno chuckled as he had the widest and most smug smile. But that was going to be washed away.

"Can you do it quietly?" Albert advised in a whisper.

Bruno searched the classroom for any student who seemed even remotely bothered by him, and it seemed like there were a few who had their heads raised in annoyance. "Do you want to get sent to the back?" the teacher suddenly threatened.

"I'm sorry, Albert, but look: I don't know how you can expect me to solve this when you didn't even explain anything before."

Albert growled. "You are *supposed* to know! These are questions even children can solve! You're in the tenth grade, newcomer!"

"You're a teacher—you're supposed to support us, not bring us down," then Bruno paused and thought about it, something he doesn't usually do. Albert is quite right here and he's just making his job harder. "Deep apologies, really. I'm just not good at math and I doubt everyone in this year is too. I don't know about my classmates, but I do know that there are other students like me who—"

"Go and sit at the back. *Now*," commanded Albert coldly.

Bruno was about to say something but decided to bite his tongue and eat his words. "Fine," he snapped.

In a bottled fit of rage, Bruno propelled himself up from his seat, pushed it harshly under his table, making a blasting sound out of it, and marched to the back of the classroom. Albert approached Connor and Casper who were shivering from Bruno's inner anger. "Connor, go sit with Alex," ordered the teacher. Connor meekly ran to his leader as Bruno dropped to his new seat. "You'll stay here for the period."

Bruno was left marinating in what just happened while everyone else was solving their papers. He can't deny that he felt like he was in kindergarten, getting sent to the back of the class for humiliation. From then, he started to notice how he was not the only one getting kind of lost. Maverick was quietly whispering to Mandy, asking for answers. Sid was trying not to fall asleep as his hollow eyes could only meet the numbing numbers on his table. Finally, he turned to watch Casper also glaring at the question under him. Bruno was truly just the loudest in the room.

Casper noticed the newcomer poking his nose at once. "Oh!" he exclaimed, startled. "Bruno…"

"Lost, huh?" Bruno asked.

"Yeah… You're right, what you said th-there. Not everyone c-can be good at m-math," Casper stated. "Y-You're sitting next to the math g-genius though!"

"I know. To Alex, solving these questions is like child's play," Bruno sighed. "Well, them's the breaks, I guess."

Casper nodded curiously as Bruno dipped his head towards the scribbled sheet that now housed memories of what had just happened. He jeered at it. "Hey, Casper. You know why numbers are called numbers?" he snickered as he lifted himself up to look at his classmate. Casper shook his head quickly. "They make us feel *numb*." The quiet boy soon chortled along with his temporary seat partner.

"You may be new, but you're already a riot," Casper whispered.

Bruno flicked his rough hair to his back. “You’re actually the first person to say that about me, at least in this school. And it’s only the first day!”

“You’re having an amazing first day, I can say that,” smiled Casper, which piqued Bruno’s interests. “How?!” he exclaimed.

The young boy shifted his turquoise and white striped scarf around before starting his muttering speech. “I remember my first day here like it was yesterday, but… I guess it was sort of recent.” He inhaled then exhaled as if he just took a marathon talking. Perhaps it is because he didn’t seem to be the talkative type. For some reason, something in Bruno compelled Casper to speak up.

“You see, I’m actually the last student to come here before you did. Yes, I was the only student who came here by the ninth grade. I wasn’t like you though, going through an elementary school, stuck in a bad middle school, then going to another branch of your oldest school… Is that right?” Bruno affirmed with an eager nod. “Well, I’m from Greenland. I came all the way from there to here because my parents wanted a better life for me and my family. Corruption nearly doesn’t exist where I lived but back home… There was next to nothing especially compared to this place.”

Casper stared out of his window, longingly, as if the frosty views of Greenland were right in front of him. Bruno had a face of sympathy for he was also sort of homesick for Brooklyn. “I miss home, but I like it here too. It has everything! And I got to meet Connor… And you now, I guess.” His fingers then shuffled around while he turned red. “Ah, sorry. I just want someone to talk to other than Connor, and I thought a newcomer would be the most approachable. I forgot we’re not even supposed to talk…”

“No, no. It’s ok. I like listening to people,” Bruno assured softly. “Say, how did you even adapt to this school? It’s… Very strange.”

“Stranger than the other schools around this city? Yeah, I sort of agree from all the stories I’ve been hearing. But I don’t know. Nobody really knows. It’s just rumors to us. The ghosts, you know?” said Casper quickly like he wanted to avoid talking about it. “But for adapting… I just went with the flow. Always ask questions to only your classmates. I tried asking many other students about the school and the politics they started, yet they’re hostile about it. It’s sort of fun, roleplaying like we’re governments… I just think we’re going too far.”

Bruno nodded along. He can’t say he disagrees with the child at all.

“Befriending Alex… That’s lucky of me,” sniggered the boy.

“We have a lot to learn, and that’s what I love about this school! Let’s hope we all are safer than other schools around the world though. So far, it is,” Casper said awkwardly.

Bruno remembered now about Terrance… Is that statement really true? “Except for Terrance,” the classmate added.

“You’re really talking more than I thought, but that’s ok. Quiet kids are awesome!” Bruno grinned, making Casper blush a bit. “Especially when they talk a lot.”

As expected, Albert arrived, though quite late into their conversation.

“Bruno, Casper, can you just quit talking for one second?!” he screamed.

Casper flinched, soon cowering into a ball, leaning right to the wall. “Sorry. Don’t blame Casper though, I started the conversation.” While his apology sounded ingenuine, Albert had enough of children’s nonsense for one day to tolerate even fighting back against them. He started to walk away.

After, an idea sparked Bruno after he just remembered a task he was given.

“Hey, Albert. I have something important to do that involves Bruce and Jackie,” he told the teacher. Albert instantly turned his back in curiosity. “They’re not here,” he scowled. Bruno had a snide smile though. “Oh, it’s the *investigation*. You don’t want your colleagues back? Fine.”

That woke up everyone from the nightmare that is solving math questions (except for Alex). Albert has awoken too as his eyes widened so high, it could reach his hairline. “Ok, ok! You got me at my weak point, young man,” snarled the math teacher.

With the fury of his heart, Bruno got up from his seat, feeling like he just saved the world. “So, can I go?” he asked yet again. Albert nodded hesitantly. “You’re already kind of bothering me anyways.” At once, he dashed out of the door without saying another word to anyone else, even Casper, who was left dumbfounded along with everyone else.

Feeling prideful, Bruno strolled around the corridors like he was the head boy of the whole school with his smug saunter. Really, all he was glad for was skipping a class of his least favorite subject. Though he hoped that he didn’t mangle his relationship with the teacher. It would ruin his reputation as an unexpected teacher’s pet.

Nonetheless, he began to think about where they could be. Alex did order him to get to the school grounds, but he's doubtful they're actually there during a lesson. It seemed unlikely. So he marched onward to Class 3. Knocking on the door, the teacher opened it. It was Mando or Marcel, the homeroom teacher, supposedly teaching English.

"Hello, Bruno," he dimly greeted.

"Hi! Can I get Ella, Mina and Poppy for a moment?"

"Why?" Mando growled.

Bruno froze for a moment before getting himself back up. "It's for finding Bruce and Jackie. They might've witnessed their disappearance or something. My classmate told me!"

"Well, they're not here," the monotone voice groaned, which shook the young boy. "They all went out… Together. They told me that they were searching for everyone's biology books that they left in the lab. I doubt they were telling the truth, but I went along with it anyways since I don't want to hear more blabbering from the back."

Bruno's mind scrambled as his plans were going to the dump. He might've skipped class for nothing! It's at this point that he realized… Maybe he should've interviewed them earlier. And for a sleeting moment, he hoped that maybe Mando was just hyperbolic… But a good part of him also wanted to believe the dull teacher. "Maybe the students would know?" Bruno asked himself in his head. His eyes searched behind the teacher who was blocking the way until there was a sudden call from inside.

"Teach, what's going on?" a voice questioned.

"Wait a moment, kids. I'm in the middle of a conversation with one of your fellows!" Mando barked.

Then they all lit up as they recognized Bruno's voice when he said, "Hello?"

"It's Bruno!" Chinchilla squealed.

Mando sighed deeply then revealed that it was indeed Bruno who he was talking to by pushing himself to the wall.

"Guys! Do you all know where Ella, Mina and Poppy really went to?"

There was mumbling from the students before Chinchilla could speak. In the meantime, Bruno noticed his old friends, Elias, Evan, Minimus and Maximus, all chatting in the crowd of tables. It was a melancholic feeling. One that made him drown.

“They really are going to the science lab, but yeah, they could also be scootering off to the bathroom.”

Mary, Adam’s daughter, propped her head up. “Well, they told me they’re going to the bathroom to fix their makeup. How did I know? Tch. I wanted to come but they declined it for some reason.”

Finally, it was puzzled in his head. The girls were going to discuss the situation at stake… That’s why they left Mary out! Perhaps they were planning to speak to Bruno after all.

“Ok! Thank you—”

“Mary,” she grinned.

“Thank you, Mary! And you too, Chinchilla,” Bruno said as he smiled back.

Before he could go away, however, he noticed Blossom’s deep gaze at him. Her jaw almost opened wide. As he saw it, Bruno’s eyes hesitated making eye contact, insisting that he shouldn’t. Blossom had already made her feelings on him clear… Yet he felt like she was different from Aster. Alas, he just concluded that he had to go.

Soon enough, Bruno reached the end of the corridor and found the girl’s bathroom where he had to wait a bit. Surprisingly, nobody passing by questioned why he was just loitering around. The whole time, he feared being assumed to be doing something unsavory! Finally, the girls come out, covered in crimson lipstick.

“Oh, hello!” Bruno greeted suddenly. That jolted the girls’ hairs out.

“Mother!” Mina exclaimed. “I almost got back my diarrhea!”

Bruno blushed. “Sorry,” he swiftly apologized. “I’ve got no time to waste. I might get in trouble if I do. You see, I’ve got to ask for the ongoing investigation about our missing teachers.”

The girls waited for a couple of moments before staring at the average boy. “What do you want from us?” Ella asked.

Bruno cleared his throat, adjusting his turtleneck to be straight. “My classmate, Connor, told me that you’re all the last people to see to Mr Bruce and Mr Jackie before they disappeared. Do you know what happened?”

He watched as the Class 3 students exchanged thoughtful glances. They sure took their time to jog their memories that were from just earlier that day. At once, Poppy suddenly lit up. “Yes!” the redhead yelped. Then her friends glared at her as if she was crazy to speak up like that. Ella soon began speaking.

"She's right. We do… Sort of," Ella awkwardly added in.

"You see, we all came back from our early morning bus, that was… For the youngest children," Mina hissed out of embarrassment. "When we got into the campus, we saw Bruce and Jackie walking together, like always last year… But something seemed… Off about them."

Bruno realized what they meant… It had to have been what Connor told all of Class 2. "Connor told me that he saw them talking to a mysterious man in the gym. He… I don't think he did manage to describe him, unless he did but to another classmate," the stammering surely didn't scream confidence in him. Not much of a good look for the girls. Nonetheless, they continued the interview.

Ella gasped. "We did see a mysterious man too!"

"He was a lengthy man. Very tall. Had the blackest hair I've ever seen—"

Mina got cut off by Poppy. "*We've* ever seen!"

"Said hair was quite long too. Covering one of his eyes."

Bruno mentally noted down every single word spewed out during the scene. Certainly was intriguing for him. "He doesn't look like any staff member here?"

"Our year knows every staff member. Junior and senior. At least our class does. We know who is in this school and who isn't, and we know the man isn't from here! Unless he's a new hire, but I'm not sure what job is open in this school right now," Ella told him.

Poppy gulped. "Besides… That man looked really creepy."

Mina and Ella nodded together.

Bruno raised an eyebrow to something he just realized. "Were you planning on telling this to me? I spoke to your classmates earlier and they said that you specifically left Mary out on your makeup trip here." Speaking in, what felt like, sophisticated English has left Bruno feeling like a true detective.

"Oh, we left Mary out because…" Mina paused, then pulling a very straight face. "We know what she'll do with our lip balm supply…"

That made Bruno blink much harder than he should. Though what got him even more stunned is realizing that he's proceeding with an interrogation in the middle of the school corridor!

Awkwardly, he said while trembling, "So, uh… Anything else?"

"No, sorry. There's nothing else to say," Ella denied.

The boy sighed deeply, defeated. He should've expected this… But time for preparation wasn't there at all. "It's fine," he lied, trying not to snap hard.

After some time, he stared and examined the girls even more. They were divine. Quite ravishing. He even dares to call one of them, Poppy, *attractive*. Suddenly, he began blushing when he started to look more at her.

"Well, bye, I guess," Ella said as she and Mina went away.

"Bye, Bruno!" Poppy grinned.

Bruno shivered. "Hey, uhm. Do you want to meet again tomorrow?"

"Sure!" she agreed quickly. And without saying any more words, she wisped herself away with her friends. He groaned and turned back to normal. "*Amazing*."

Dragging himself back to class, filled and drowned in shame, Bruno passed through the many boards begging him to believe in himself. Motivation speeches that go through one ear and pass through another. It was humiliating.

As he returned, he saw his classmate almost hitting a paper airplane at him by accident. Indeed, *Renard* was playing with those planes!

"Hi Bruno! Again!" Nadia greeted happily.

He dodged another crafted aircraft. "The heck happened while I was gone?" he mumbled to himself. Before rushing to his seat, he remembered that Connor was sitting there. Though when he reached his row, the white sweater boy stood up. "You can stay here. Albert doesn't… Mind anything anymore." At once, Bruno glanced at the tired Math teacher who seemed to have completely lost himself and just proceeded to sit in his rightful seat while Connor returns to his own.

Bruno then notices Alex chilling with his legs crossed, solving random sudoku questions on a book dedicated to the game. He was about to open his mouth before biting his tongue and opening his rough book to note down what did he just go through.

"Found anything?" Alex questioned out of the blue.

Almost at a loss for words, Bruno collected himself. "Nothing new." He groaned. "I left the class and caused a scene for *nothing*."

"Speak for yourself. Renard has practically caused a scene because of…" He stopped to point at the flying paper which made Bruno snicker.

For once, Bruno and Alex could just… Relax. Though for how long will this last? The planes may not fly anymore… And this moment will fleet.

Chapter 12
Recipe for Disaster

After a while from the interrogation, it was cooking class. As Bruno would've learned earlier that day, Munz, or Mr George Baker, would be teaching him and his classmates. He believed that it was unfortunate that a seemingly incompetent teacher would be teaching such a fascinating subject, but at the same time, Bruno was grateful that at least he could let his creative mind go wild for forty-five minutes. He also considered the fact that his judge of character could be wrong. Mr. Baker was only known to him for roughly an hour after all.

It didn't take long for everyone to arrive at the cooking room—or cooking "hall" as it was labelled (probably by Munz himself). Unsurprisingly, Bruno was the last to come. Despite running around the school for a segment of the day, he still didn't know the directions to the rooms of his own floor.

Once Bruno arrived, he viewed the room's stunning size. It was enormous, having three rows and two columns of tables dedicated to baking and cooking.

What was more enamoring was, what Bruno believed to be, the teacher's desk. Unlike other ones, it was on a stage, a little higher than the rest of the classroom. The desk itself was also tall, accommodating Munz's incredible size. Its legs extend 4 feet above the stage! On the table was, expectedly, a bunch of plastic bags full of food and stationery. The most Bruno could make out of the latter was a stapler, for the height was too high for him.

Even the wallpaper was interesting. Unlike other classes (which had boring brown, sometimes wooden-textured, walls), the walls are sandy yellow, with a white foundation line running across the bottom of it. The floor was patterned diagonally, and a mixture of brown and beige.

In front of him were the tables. They were all the same. White, long, and containing two microwaves and ovens for each.

Bruno tried to keep his jaw from falling before Alex approached him. "Bruno," Alex called. Hearing his name alone is what woke up Bruno.

"Bruno?" Alex repeated.

Bruno began to move himself, twisting his head to look at his yellow-clothed partner. “Sorry. I just… Never saw a classroom as huge as this…” quietly told Bruno, almost having a tone of longing in him.

“I was like this my first time running into this place,” Alex responded coldly.

“You’re lucky you didn’t faint!” Maverick yelled far back from Bruno and Alex, already claiming his seat with Mandy.

Alex didn’t get any emotion out of his face. He only stared at Maverick, Bruno next. He suddenly pulled a smile not long after Maverick spoke, however. He motioned his head towards the table where Maverick and Mandy were.

“Come on. Let’s not get Mr. Baker mad at us,” Alex suggested.

Bruno paused to look at the table. “We’re sitting next to Maverick and Mandy?” he asked.

“We can change another time,” Alex roughly answered, seemingly not giving Bruno any moment to breathe when starting to speak. “For now, we’re going to stay with them.”

Bruno was reluctant to follow Alex as he doesn’t have the best relationship with Maverick and Mandy. The former goes sour sometimes, while the latter’s relationship with Bruno is blank. Nonetheless, Bruno wanted to be a loyal and good class prince to Alex, so he went along with Alex anyways.

Not long after, Munz finally arrived at class. Of course, not without an inviting earthquake from his walking. It was so loud that some of the lighter students began jumping out of their seats.

“Good morning students!” Munz chuckled as he swept out of the door, and tried his best to rush to the front of class.

Nobody answered because they’d either have fallen from their seats or froze. Everyone except Alex who corrected him by saying “Mr. Baker, it’s noon.”

“Well, good *afternoon*! Whatever it is, welcome to your first cooking class!” Munz harmonized. Well, the best he could. His raspy voice took over what he tried to turn into a melody that it just sounded like a normal sentence. “Since it’s the first day, I’m supposed to introduce myself, but it seems like all of you know me already! You know…” Munz said, hinting to how he “saved,” the students earlier that day from the gym.

“As if he saved Mr Bruce and Mr Jackie…” Riley whispered to Sheldon who was at the same table as him, heckling Munz’s false act he’s implying.

“Anyhow. Let’s begin by concocting a simple recipe! Cakes! Any cake of your choice! Flavor and kind!” exclaimed Munz. He raised both his hands up, akin to getting ready to give someone a hug.

Everyone’s light shined yet again as they instantly went on to collect the needed ingredients. Everyone except for Bruno, who was confused as a child lost in a street.

“Alex? What am I supposed to do?” Bruno asked Alex, who was reaching for sugar in the bottom cabinet.

“Why, bake a cake? Didn’t Mr. Baker say that?” Alex answered, with a question right after. It sounded condescending to Bruno.

“Yeah, but, am I supposed to bake with you?” Bruno asked.

“Of course!” Alex exclaimed, his eyes widened from what he thought was Bruno’s stupidity. “Now wake up and let’s work!” ordered Alex. Bruno concluded that Alex had turned impatient.

“What cake are we even baking? Red velvet? Cheesecake? Normal cake? Strawberry shortcake?” Bruno kept asking before Alex sighed deeply and straightened himself up as he stood.

“Chocolate cake,” Alex muttered.

“Chocolate!? Oh, how about white?” Bruno cried as he suggested.

“White cake? Seriously?” Alex snickered for what seemed to be the first time.

Bruno avoided saying anything related to what Alex potentially wanted to hear. Instead, he asked him back. “What’s with you and chocolate anyways?” He almost sounded sarcastic as he asked.

Alex rolled his eyes, wanting to avoid answering. He started to preheat the oven, then pulled all the bowls he could together, then quickly threw the butter in before he finally answered Bruno. It only took him a couple minutes of silence to do so. “Chocolate is healthy,” Alex answered, almost sounding as if it’s obvious. “Well, *dark* chocolate,” he soon corrected himself.

“Oh? Tell me how,” Bruno asked, a hint of curiosity stirred up in him. He freely dropped in bits of vanilla while asking.

Alex avoided the question, which is what Bruno expected to happen at some point during their conversation. He asked, “… Are we baking a *white* cake now?” Bruno nodded. His eyes pinched down so close that it looked like he was closing them. Alex rolled, not only his eyes, but his whole head, before he reluctantly tossed

the chocolate powder back to the cabinet. “Chocolate is unhealthy, though, isn’t it?” Bruno hissed, not wanting to avoid the topic the duo brought up.

“Actually, *dark* chocolate can keep your hair and skin healthy. Reduce heart risk and is a source of antioxidants. It’s extremely nutritious, as it is rich in minerals, iron, magnesium, copper, phosphorus and zinc. Most importantly, however, it improves your brain power,” Alex explained.

Bruno almost snored during the middle of the explanation. The only thing keeping him awake was the process of baking as he mixed the ingredients of the bowl and tried to find good frosting that Alex somehow forgot to borrow.

“Just look at white cakes!” Alex loudly pointed out, almost barking. “Full of vanilla!”

“Well, it is just *vanilla* cake…” Bruno affirmed.

“Yes!” Alex affirmed right after Bruno did. “Full of vanilla that is simply expensive!”

Bruno rolled his eyes, knowing he’s in for another nerdy explanation of a cake flavor. He wouldn’t be surprised if Aster would’ve given the same argument regarding expenses. At the same time, Bruno was surprised that Munz didn’t call the two out for arguing already.

Unsurprisingly, Alex went on with the disadvantages of vanilla. Though Alex could still mix ingredients, pouring hot water into the batter, then into the pan before Bruno could take it to the preheated oven. At this point, Bruno was tuned out of Alex’s nonsensical speech and only paid attention to perfecting the cake recipe. It sounded like white noise, really.

“... Most of all: Vanilla is just plain! So… *ordinary*! Nothing! I believe whoever likes that flavor is just as plain as it is,” Alex finally concluded it as the oven’s clock ticked. Unlike other points, however, Bruno was caught off guard by that last one. Alex wasn’t aware of Bruno’s feelings about himself, so it was natural that Alex didn’t get what he was implying here, especially after learning that Bruno prefers white, or vanilla, cake over chocolate.

“Bruno, the cake?” Alex mentioned.

Bruno woke up from being lost in thought and stared at the cake.

“Oh!” Bruno exclaimed, swiftly taking the pan with his oversized gloves. He soon led out a “phew!” because he learned that the cake wasn’t black. It was a pleasant surprise it wasn’t.

Bruno studied the cake closely. Perhaps what Alex was saying isn't false, as the white cake does look blank. Empty. Nothing. *Ordinary*. Bruno felt like it reflected… himself. He shook his head to avoid the crazy thoughts that plagued him of course. It caused him to find some sprinkles which he gasped out of happiness and pulled them out. "Let's decorate it, Alex!" Bruno smiled as he said.

"Good, but let's start with frosting it," Alex recommended. "How about chocolate?"

"*Again* with the chocolate?" Bruno wallowed.

Bruno then looked at the cake again. Seeing how blank it was, he considered that *maybe* Alex's idea wasn't *so* bad.

He sighed deeply, even turning his head down. He turned it up to look at Alex and say, "Alright," almost in defeat.

"Don't worry. Only a hint of chocolate will be the frosting in the bottom! You can frost the top with the white frosting," Alex told Bruno.

Bruno looked down at the cabinet and snatched the white frosting as Alex said the latter sentence. "Ok," Bruno responded silently.

Alex carefully began to frost the bottom of the cake, though only as outlines.

During the careful frosting, Maverick, who was right behind Alex, began to laugh out loud. "Wow, you two sure bicker like three-year-olds unwilling to share anything!" Maverick quickly insulted, so much so that Bruno couldn't make out what Maverick was really saying. The fact that it was drowned out by the rest of the class talking didn't help.

Either way, Bruno knew that Maverick was making fun of the duo. He scoffed, saying "At least we completed baking. You didn't even finish mixing the secondary ingredients!" Maverick groaned before Munz walked in. It surprised Bruno. After, what felt like forever, of arguing—only now Munz comes in?

Maverick sneakily rushed to continue baking with Mandy. Alex noticed Munz soon enough, flinching at the sight of him.

"Mr. B-Baker!" Alex stuttered in the middle of exclaiming.

"What's going on here?" Munz asked.

"Munz! We're sorry! We swear we're just—" Bruno quickly tried to answer for a potential lecture.

Suddenly, Munz laughed.

Alex had a face of horror while Bruno was utterly confused, even his pupils getting attracted to Alex for a moment.

"Wow! I can't believe you're almost done!" Munz said. "Just without the *odd* frosting," Munz evidently pointed to something as soon as he said that.

Alex snapped back to life as he looked down at the bottom frosting. He didn't notice it when frosting, but the line to the right was going out! Alex gasped, instantly licking it with a lifted finger full of frosting, then lining the border back.

Munz laughed at Alex's awkward face afterward.

"Everyone does that. You two surely have potential! I'm especially happy for you, Alex. You haven't had a partner in ages. Now that you have one, even if you're arguing over whatever blabber it is, you still worked on your cake!" Munz complimented.

Alex sighed, even having a face of triumph. Meanwhile, Bruno began to frost the top of the cake with the white cream. At the same time looking at Maverick puffing his cherry cheeks. He smiled greatly at him.

"Munz, we're almost done. We just need sprinkles," Bruno said.

"Well, Mr. Baker. Why'd you be so happy anyways?" Alex asked. Despite being happy from not being punished from "discussing" cake flavors, he also was deeply wondering about why causing such a ruckus didn't warrant any punishment. "Yeah, we were just… openly discussing about flavors," Bruno added in the background. He almost twisted his words as he was more focused on correctly frosting the cake and adding sprinkles more than anything.

"Oh! I didn't see it as a discussion about cake flavors! It's a discussion about personality," Munz answered.

The answer didn't really answer anything sadly. As a matter of fact, it confused the pair even more! "Elaborate," Alex commanded.

"Ah. I heard you two talking about liking dark chocolate and vanilla. Bruno, you're a vanilla lover, I know that. Vanilla is such a simple flavor, yes… But it's oh so delicately sweet," Munz explained further. Bruno tried his best to keep his grip and, more importantly, hold back from laughter. Munz continued, saying "Dark chocolate, on the other hand, is bitter and sweet, just like Alex."

Alex, unlike Bruno who was charmed by his supposed description, was visibly offended and confused. "Excuse me, *bitter* and sweet?! I am not *bitter*!" Alex raised his voice before holding himself down. He turned red. It was obvious that he had to do this to not "get in trouble."

Munz ignored Alex though, since he heard Sid call out, “Mr. Baker!”

Munz instantly took himself away from the pair he was previously talking to, instead going for Sid, which surprised Bruno. What surprised him even more was when Munz tasted Sid’s cake, which was cheesecake. The students surrounding Sid could see Munz’s face lighting up. Full of delight and wonder. His eyes even turned star-like.

“Wow! I don’t think I should be surprised, Sid, but your cake is a masterpiece! It always is,” Munz complimented Sid. Sid, unlike anyone else in this situation, simply sat there and had the blankest smile anyone could’ve ever seen. His only motion was a slight nod.

Bruno took note of what was going on across the room. So did everyone it seems, including Alex. “Woah!” Bruno exclaimed, trying his best to lower his volume. “Sid can bake?” In contrast to Bruno, Alex was frowning down to the ground and suppressing his vocals from bursting out of him. It was only when Bruno spoke did it provoke Alex to speak again. “Of course he can. He *always* can,” Alex hissed. His head even bobbed down, almost hiding his neck out of pure rage. “Only imbeciles can truly bake a five-star cake!” continued Alex.

Bruno flinched just as he heard that last statement. “What made you come to that conclusion?” whispered Bruno, his face frightened as he does so.

“Oh, not only are Sid and Mr. Baker good at this, some of the slowest people I’ve met, but I’m also awful at baking,” Alex answered quickly, rushing to avoid being caught talking behind Munz’s back.

Bruno snickered at Alex’s last answer, however. He never thought Alex would be bad at anything other than athletics and socializing, especially something as trivial as baking a cake. Even the cheesecake Sid baked seemed simple. “Oh?” Bruno whispered out.

“Yeah. I’m terrible at it. This cake is probably the best thing I’ve made so far,” Alex affirmed. Bruno tried his best to not laugh again. Alex even had a trace of a smile in him.

After some time of festering happiness from Munz and pride from Sid, the former slowly, but not quietly, approaches Bruno and Alex who haven’t even tasted their cake yet. As a matter of fact, he hasn’t tasted anyone’s cakes except for Sid’s.

Munz burped before he apologized with his palms closed together. “Sorry! I was so focused on my most prized student!”

“I can tell,” Alex remarked, obviously showing some snark.

“Now, I’ll try everyone’s cake! Yours is first. So lucky,” Munz said.

Alex raised his eyebrow, and his left eye opened as both were closed when remarking. He didn’t say anything despite Bruno predicting so.

Munz tucked out a spoon from his jacket, which had multiple pockets for the same number of utensils, whether for cooking or eating. He plummeted the spoon down to the white cake, covering it with frosting. It looked like snow being scooped out of winter ground. When Munz tasted what seemed to be only the frosting and the sprinkle, his eyes glimmered, but not in the same fantastical manner as Sid’s cake. Bruno could tell by Alex’s neutral face that Munz’s reaction was normal. After all, all the sugar could’ve easily stimulated him.

“How… simple. Simplicity isn’t bad, per se, but I believe you could add a bit more… pizzazz!” Munz suggested.

Bruno twitched his eye, almost wanting to break his neck out of fury. “All because it’s vanilla?” Bruno snapped at himself. “Didn’t you say vanilla is simple and sweet?”

“I was describing you, Bruno,” Munz corrected.

Bruno’s face pouted even more. His cheeks turned as red as the strawberry shortcakes some of his classmates perfected the recipe of.

“See how I feel?” Alex asked, looking like he was going to say *‘I told you so’* right after a snort.

“I’m not saying it’s bad! Far from it! You’re better than seventh graders, I can give you that! I bet your classmates are too,” Munz said.

“I don’t want to be *like* my classmates,” Bruno muttered under his breath, quiet enough so nobody could hear it, even Alex couldn’t. However, Alex could see that Bruno did say *something*. “Bruno?” Alex asked. He finally sounded concerned about Bruno after so many periods, although it was too late for any possible damage done to Bruno.

This matter didn’t seem too important to Munz. So much so that he simply shrugged it off. What made it worse was what Bruno followed up saying, and possibly answered Alex, afterwards. “*I’m okay.”* It was a lie to Alex, but not to Munz.

Munz suddenly said something that the duo didn't expect at all. Well, maybe Alex should've seen the subject coming up, but not the timing of it.

"Well, there's certainly someone I know you two can't be compared to!" Munz lightened up. "That star guy… And the Japanese girl!"

Bruno gulped just hearing those descriptions. Alex was worse. He visibly flinched at them. "Aster and Blossom?!" Alex instantly screamed.

"Oh yes! Aster… Johnson! Jonquil?" Munz started to ponder. "Well, they're excellent at baking! Aster is the truly talented one, while Blossom has her enthusiasm and passion for art."

Alex facepalmed and groaned so hard, that there was no way Munz didn't hear it.

"See what I mean? Only imbeciles are good at cooking!" Alex whispered to Bruno, wanting to yell so bad. Bruno didn't say anything in response. He was only frozen.

"Ah… Aster has the best baking skills… He made those… What do they call it? Ube rolls?" Munz continued. "Ube… rolls? Aren't those Asian?" Bruno asked, saying his first sentence since Munz roughly mentioned the pink and purple troublemakers. Munz didn't say anything, however. Only staying in his standing state, thinking of what to say next.

"Didn't you speak to them earlier today?" Munz asked. He snapped his finger, supposedly realizing the truth. "Ah! You did! I saw you two talking to them earlier!"

Alex rolls his eyes on hearing that. "We sure did," he responded.

"Are you befriending them? Oh, please say yes! You four sure are perfect friends for each other!" Munz asked them with enthusiasm.

Alex was enraged. His voice equal to the fury he was experiencing. "Perfect friends?!" he yelled. "Mr. Baker, haven't you seen me ye-"

"Oh, of course! Huh. Weren't you friends with them, Alex?" Munz interrupted, following up with a question that could be obviously answered.

At this point, Alex's face couldn't take it anymore. If Alex was a balloon, he'd explode by then. Into bitter rubber pieces that once resembled something valued. On the different side of the coin, Bruno was as calm as he could ever be.

To the duo's classmates, their respective behaviors during this situation were surprising. Alex was seen as a wise, calm and collected leader who seemed to have always got everything under control, including the recent mystery of the teacher's

disappearance. While most of them never really knew Bruno for that long, they could tell he was an impulsive type. An impulsive boy that only works on emotions, rather than rational thoughts.

Bruno, ignoring his onlooking classmates, turned to Alex. He felt as if he should touch his shoulders, perhaps shake him out of his emotions, but decided not to. Alex does seem to like his personal space after all—not too different from Aster.

"Well… I don't think he could understand," Bruno told Alex quietly.

"Understand what?" Munz asked. This shocked Bruno. He thought that there was no way Munz could hear anything of that volume.

"That."

"I'm."

"Not."

"Going to be friends with them."

"AGAIN!"

Alex said all his words as if they were different sentences. It looked as if Alex was spelling it out for his dim-witted teacher. Despite that, it did nothing to affect how Munz thought now. All Alex got out of his teacher was a slight tilt of shock from him, though anyone would've reacted the same way as Munz, even a snail. "Wait, you're not friends with them anymore?" Munz asked with a new brittle voice. It was so sudden that it shocked Bruno the same way Alex's words shocked Munz.

Contrasting Munz's defeated look was Alex's tempered one. Bruno could see Alex's clenched fists, which was strange. Alex doesn't seem to be the violent type; why would he try to punch *anything*, let alone his teacher (possibly)?

Only the people surrounding Alex could hear a slight "wh," out of him, as if he was going to exclaim "What?!" At the same time, his body twitched along with his right eye. His body almost rushed to the edge of the cabinet too.

"OF COURSE I'M NOT!" Alex yelled. Bruno experienced his shock yet again, and his eye twitched for a slight second. "I—"

Alex was stopped by his own body. He thrusted himself away from his teacher. His anger might've gotten him too far. That's what Bruno believed could be why Alex suddenly stopped yelling. Alex could even be heard inhaling and exhaling, although it is very quiet—almost as quiet as a jellyfish attempting to create any sound.

Bruno could tell completely though that Alex wanted to avoid any trouble with the teachers. Even if it's been a day since he knew him, Bruno knew Alex was the

type of student to hate any sort of school punishment. Any punishment that could result in talking back to the teacher, or even worse, yelling out loud in front of class and in the *middle* of a lesson.

Munz, unlike Bruno, however, was ignorant. Even Maverick and Mandy, who were right beside Alex yet didn't seem to be the most empathetic people, could tell Alex wanted to get out of trouble.

"Oh, Alex!" Munz chuckled. "They could've easily passed on their incredible baking powers to you! Oh! Maybe that's why your skills aren't on par with them! Er... If you're even being serious about what you said."

Alex was stunned by those words. Awful last sentences, Bruno thought. He conjured up scenarios where Alex would snap and break a bunch of wires—perhaps even electrocute himself! But Bruno was going too far with those thoughts, of course. What he thought most of though, is how dim Munz was. How it isn't so obvious to him that Alex *never* jokes about anything. Even Bruno himself knows someone who knew Alex for *a day*! Such an oblivious man, Bruno kept thinking.

Munz kept going on. His words wanting to be heard as white noise by Alex.

"Like, you could've learned how to make an ube roll from Aster!" Munz suggested.

As soon as Munz said that, Bruno's mind instantly jumped to working on thoughts about Aster. Bruno always thought the rolls Munz kept mentioning were Asian—although Bruno can't pinpoint where exactly. If that's the case, then that does mean Aster is from Asia, or at the very least have Asian relatives. What lingered in Bruno's thought as well was how Aster learned how to bake at all! He doesn't see Aster as "the baking type" so it was foreign to him.

"Or… Mochi from Blossom!" Munz added, with a pause, possibly thinking about some dessert from Japan that Blossom had baked prior to that day.

A hefty sigh led out of Munz's huge mouth. The sigh was so strong, it could've blown trees akin to a windy day. "I'm getting ahead of myself," Munz huffed. A draining moan could be heard while he was saying that. Almost like letting out sweat after a hard day at the gym.

Munz's face suddenly lit up. His smile grew many inches more and his eyes widened, reaching his half-skinny eyebrows. It was the first time Bruno could properly see Munz's eyes as his eyelids would make it look like he never opened his eyes. "Oh! I know what!" Munz barked. His hand lifted, then his index finger pointed

to the sky, indicating he came up with a lightbulb idea. “I can invite Aster and Blossom in! I bet they'll entertain Bruno too!” brightly said Munz.

Bruno could hear a faceplant on the table. He could guess it was Alex, but he didn’t want to see as he was too stunned by Munz’s words to do so. Bruno’s eyes widened as much as Munz, albeit not reaching his eyebrows. Bruno had a gut reaction to slam his hands on the tabletop, but just couldn’t. He wanted to control and compose himself.

While Bruno was staring at the wooden-textured tabletop and was clearly exasperated, he could quietly hear the voices of Carly and Sarah—well, quietly as they could be. Even if they were sitting in the far back of the cooking room, their voices could be nails on a chalkboard being played with headphones. Bruno could hear a chuckle out of Carly, and laughter that sounded like barking from Sarah.

“Please do.” Carly said in a harmonizing tone. After Sarah scratched her voice from laughing, she added, “It'll be our pleasure to watch!”

It was plainly clear to Bruno that they just wanted to watch him (and maybe Alex to some extent) suffer. And suffering will happen if Aster and Blossom are brought into the table.

Munz was oblivious to this, of course. Just as oblivious as he was to Alex’s unmatched frustration. “Well! If the daughter of the class teacher approves of it...” Munz said in an undertone, as if he wanted to surprise the class, yet they’d already know what would happen. Nonetheless, Bruno could feel—no, smell—the bone-cracking malicious smiles of Carly and Sarah. Bruno could only imagine the creepiest of creepiest evil smiles. Smiles from Utter Darkness itself, implanted on Carly and Sarah. He couldn’t have imagined worse. To gravitate himself back to reality, he twisted his torso to look right at the duo. Expectedly, they were smiling maliciously, but not as exaggerated as Bruno had imagined. “Then I’ll bring them!” snorted Munz as Bruno could hear footsteps fading out into the background, supposedly through the room door, only being able to be heard until it dies out. However, Bruno wasn’t looking behind him—where Munz was, so he couldn’t really tell. What Munz said didn’t matter anyways. Seemed it didn’t register to Bruno’s head much.

Bruno had a long blink as he turned back to see the front of him. Not long after, he turned his head to look at Alex, who looked distressed as ever. Rather angered as well. “Wow,” he grunted. “Didn’t even tell me to look after the class.

Such a shameless teacher," Bruno could guess so. Teachers showing favoritism to their best students isn't news to him. He could recount many occasions where teachers rushed out of class to meet their golden pupil way back in his former school. What's happening in front of him isn't too different.

While living with those thoughts, Bruno could also tell that Alex was disheveled beside his table. Alex wanted to stand up and examine the class as he had always done—as a leader—yet Munz didn't ask him to. Bruno glanced at the bottom of Alex's table and could instantly notice that, for Alex's right leg was pumping like a heartbeat, while his left foot had tilted, leaving only his toes to feel the floor.

Bruno's sympathetic eyes returned to Alex, soon saying "Don't worry. I feel the same—"

"Bruno, monitor the class," Alex told Bruno urgently, almost wanting to raise his right palm in front of Bruno's face. Bruno led out a hard swallow. "I'll keep the cake safe," added Alex with a hesitant tone.

"Keep it safe? Is someone going to eat it? And why can't *I* keep it safe?" Bruno kept asking. His pupils slowly and slowly start to shrink, smaller and smaller as each question passes.

Alex scoffed quite loudly. A pout grew in his face. "Just do as I say," Alex said in a more commanding tone than his previous shifty one. "You get me, vice leader?" His eyebrow soon raised.

Bruno sighs quietly, then nods reluctantly. He didn't want to do any more work that day—he felt that way ever since he and his classmates tasked themselves to solve the mystery of their missing teachers. No words had to be bellowed to assure Alex's worry about the safe cake. Only Bruno's simple head tilt and distancing away from Alex would do the trick.

At that exact moment, the door flung open. It could've easily been broken by Munz, who was the one that pelted it. Bruno's face matched the same worrisome one that Munz bore, albeit Bruno being troubled about the sudden break in and the fact that he had to suddenly act as some sort of hall monitor for the class.

"EVERYONE! EVERYONE!" Munz shouted at the top of his massive lungs.

"What!?" Violet exclaimed in the background.

Bruno stood there, frozen in place. Only his face could express how he felt at the time.

“Is it another threat?! I won’t let it get to us this time!” added Riley. His hands chopped down to invisible wooden planks as he said so, signaling what he might do if there was any danger to be had.

“NO!” Munz answered everyone with a single yell. “Aster and Blossom are MISSING!” he finally said.

It wasn’t the answer anyone expected. They more of so thought he’d say, *“I saw a sixth grader reject a cookie!”* or some news that meant to truly endanger them. Maybe even anything about Bruce and Jackie if they were hopeful enough. Although the news of a couple of students is still alarming, it still means *nothing* to their mystery, unless it was *truly* linked…

That last train of thought seemed to have struck everyone in unison. What made it even worse was that the lights flickered. It wasn’t uncommon for this to happen in the school, and students were quite used to it at this point, but it was certainly adding to the already unsettling moment. Everyone turned into ice. Connor and Casper had even left the cake in their oven, yet it didn’t even thaw them one bit. They were the most afraid out of everyone after all.

Bella was the only one who produced any sort of noise. She squeaked a loud gasp. Soon enough, she screamed, “WE’RE DOOMED!” The word ‘doomed’ was stretched beyond anyone’s comprehension. Bella’s screeching made it nails on a chalkboard.

Murmurs could be heard not long after. It’s all the students who were anxious that they were in danger as much as Aster and Blossom. Bruno couldn’t tell why they were frightened at first. He made his first motion at that time, stepping sideways to stand beside Alex, who was a bomb about to explode.

“WAIT!” Alex shouted, pausing everyone from yelping.

“Are they really missing or—”

“Yes!” Munz quickly affirmed.

“—Roaming around the school grounds?” Alex finally finished. His face went from being bright red and passionate to dull and dim, fully unamused by Munz jumping to conclusions like what he just did—or he believes it’s undeniably what he assumes that’s true.

“You barely even took a second,” added Bruno. He had a brittle voice, much different than his usual brash one. It seemed that the fact that he was tasked with

being leader for a second while having to be pressured for moments genuinely sank him. “You very well could’ve just… not checked well.”

“Furthermore, they could’ve been in the bathroom,” Alex added.

Munz had a face of deep denial. Munz seemed as if he wanted to hide the fact that he was wrong to himself. To Bruno, Munz being a sloth, and a glutton was one thing, but being egotistical was another for him.

“Well! You lot said that there’s a m-murderer on the loose here, and I-I don’t want to be a victim h-here, nor do I want anyone to b-be one!” Munz’s stammering didn’t stop Bruno from feeling ruthless. As a matter of fact, it worsened the sentiment. “Oh right! There’s a murderer on the loose!” wallowed Munz, sounding as if he just now heard the news, or that none of the teens standing in front of him didn’t already know firsthand. Alex facepalmed, like he always does. There was an obvious deep sigh, that could almost be mistaken for a groan. “Oh, I’ll miss them! Every victim!” Munz went on. His elongated voice made him sound like a fork scratching against a plate. Even a gaping papercut would be less painful than whatever anyone’s sensing.

Bruno kept a smile as he always does, despite everyone else in the room having entirely opposite expressions. He, who wasn’t too far from Munz, patted the teacher on the back akin to greeting an old friend. “Either way, Mr. Baker,” he started. “You don’t need to be worried. If you’re too scared to check, then *I will*!”

Bruno’s assurance did anything but ease anyone’s mind. It only made the circumstances worse! This was evident by everyone roaring, “What!?” in unison.

“Bruno, it’s dangerous out there! Munz is scared for a reason after all!” Nadia trembled while saying.

“Yes! Please don’t be another number getting added to Terrance’s kill count!” Roselynn diligently warned Bruno alongside her friend.

Bruno shook his head without much thought other than his impulsive ideas. His wooden-colored hair turning wispy and scrambled was indicative of how he was seen by his students now. Simply a mess of blank beliefs about the situation at hand. “So?” he jumped to saying. “Suppose the Lanes *are* kidnapped by Terrance… I still could probably solve this damn mystery about the teachers and save them. I might have a few scars and bruises, yeah, but it’s all worth it in the end, isn’t it?”

The question opposed in the end stumbled every person in the room. Munz, too, was feeling the same. Alex, who got silent for some time, finally got his mouth

back. A subtle breath could narrowly be heard. Alex stepped forward, then reached to the left of Bruno in front of everyone's view. "You can't do this alone, Bruno," he said softly.

"Alright?" Bruno stammered as he raised an eyebrow. His head was twisted to eye Alex, Eventually, it spun to everyone. "Who's coming along?" the same tone and voice questioned.

Silence commenced. The only sounds heard were Munz's frequent coughs and white noise emanating from the background. It went on until Alex's footsteps were heard, moving to where Bruno was once standing.

"I will," Alex said voluntarily.

"What?"

"Really."

"You just said—"

"Look. I may be the leader of Class 2, but that doesn't mean I don't have the responsibility of peeling my eyes out for other students of my year, no matter if they're the enemy or not. You do, too, Bruno," Alex explained.

Bruno's tone of misbelief in his voice and his matching face can't be ignored—not even by Alex who seemed set in helping Bruno, for good reason too. Nonetheless, it's not like Bruno had any choice but to accept Alex into his mission. Not only was Alex his leader, but he was also his only classmate who was willing to volunteer for him. As if any student were up to helping him—except Blue, perhaps. "Okay then," he wound himself while saying.

Bruno's brain was exclusively bothered by Alex's participation in his search for Aster and Blossom. What is Bruno going to do if he and Alex get caught out of class? How is Alex going to react? His mind kept jostling between Alex lecturing him or Alex silently crying in the detention room.

The worst-case scenario for Bruno was his and Alex's deaths. This could very well be some trick Terrance is pulling off. Capturing Aster and Blossom to lure the two into killing them. Executing a nasty ambush on a couple empathetic teenagers. Bruno pondered on what could be worse than that. It's possible that the killer could've kidnapped Aster and Blossom to ensnare Bruno and Alex into his trap, blowing them all off with whatever he uses to kill his victims. What could be the reason he'd be doing this is unknown to Bruno, however.

Meanwhile, Bruno could see beside him a paralyzed Munz in the mere distance. Speechless, solely because of Bruno and Alex being seen as 'throwing themselves into danger'. He soon turned to view Alex, who was simply standing with a blank expression. Bruno was anticipating something to happen.

"Let's not get through this without any hints though," Alex began to say. "Mr. Baker," Alex subtly coughed, soon turning to speak to Munz. "When was the last time you've seen Aster and Blossom?"

Munz coughed the same way Alex was, although more of so clearing his throat. "Aster was with Class 4 just last period! Right here. He made the best cake of all his peers. Lemon cake… He even smelled like lemon when he was returning to class. Blossom, however… I last saw her in the early morning. Had a class with her and her classmates. She had a scent of strawberry," he recounted.

Bruno didn't like the impression he got of Munz. That he mainly remembered people he had last seen by their smells, not by wherever they went. Alex visibly seemed to have the same opinion.

"Seriously? You only remember smells? Don't you know how fast scents run away!?" Alex shouted.

The benefit of the doubt bloated Bruno's mind. He thought of the possible ways Munz's input could help. Even if he too thinks it's ridiculous, it might be helpful. Added onto that, the timeframe Munz mentioned was important. "Come on, Alex. It could be useful. Anyone who didn't see them but could've smelled them at the time would definitely be useful like this," said Bruno. Alex didn't buy things the same way Bruno did, especially Munz. He already didn't seem to fancy Munz earlier, why not disbelieve him? Either way, Alex did want to help Bruno, and it's not like he'll do Bruno any favors by disagreeing. "Perhaps... Perhaps not. We must cross our fingers to see if that'll happen," Alex said dishearteningly. He even had a subtle shrug. "And we probably would!" yelled Bruno.

Bruno held himself back from going forward. If he didn't, then he would have a good chance of slipping over frosting on the ground. Pressure fell on Bruno's shoulders as he sighed. At that moment, the feeling of being watched by his classmates swallowed him. "But if I have to be honest. I just want to find them. I don't care about the *duty* of it, just... I don't want to see *anyone* get hurt," Bruno said honestly. The soft tone he issued touched Alex. He blinked at the speed of sound. Not long after, an itch could be heard above his head, his head brushing it. Then he

flung his arms to the back of him, letting his two hands touch each other, tying a finger knot.

"That's quite noble of you, Bruno," uttered Alex with astonishment. It's as if he heard the US president give an honorable speech of massive importance. His face was that of shock, but somehow sadness as well. Soon, his hair danced along with his head while it twisted and turned around. "But let's get on to our mission already!"

Alex sprung into sudden motion. Accelerating his head towards Spencer, a signal could be soon with a nod off to the distance. "Spencer," he called. Spencer got his own gears going akin to Alex.

"Can you keep the class safe?" asked Alex with urgency.

Determined, Spencer responded with, "You can always count on me, your majesty!" Almost a bow sent forth from him, but it seemed he remembered the class was in a dire situation.

"Thank you," Alex said simply, yet those words meant so much.

The duo strolled out of the door, sealing it for their peers to blankly see. There was nothing. Nothing to see. Only the traces of Bruno and Alex left behind—that being the scents Munz would recognize.

The only student that broke the silence was Isabella. "May I have your condolences?" Bella asked. Nobody knew if she was joking, or if she was serious about thinking that her king and prince weren't coming back. Usually, there is no change in tone when she's kidding or not—and the current moment was no different.

Max was the only one to respond back, saying "Be reasonable, Bella!" Only Nadia could see that Bella was rolling her eyes to the back of her skull. Her irises shy of purely whitening her eyes.

Meanwhile, Bruno and Alex were trotting from the baking classroom to Class 4. Why they were going there first instead of the other two classes should be obvious. Aster is a member of the class, thus it's reasonable to think that maybe someone there would have an idea of what happened to him. Class 3 could help with Blossom, but they weren't entirely the most reliable class for investigations either.

Upon opening the door, Bruno found the dozens of students inhabiting the classroom. Unlike Class 2, it was dark and had a bold, hardy feel to it that he felt back in his old school (that wasn't Open Book School's Brooklyn branch). Bruno could even smell a wooden scent off someone sitting at the front. The feeling perfectly matches Class 4's reputation. A reputation of harsh and tough students.

“Hello, Class 4…” Alex greeted slowly, perhaps carefully too.

A student grinned. He looked as if he wanted to rise from his seat, but he didn’t. It was Michael Walls, the leader of Class 4. “Alex. Haven’t seen you twice in a day in ages,” Michael said as if he’s meeting an old friend yet again.

Alex evidently ignored Michael for Ms. Kelsey, the teacher currently teaching everyone. She was the physics teacher. Kelsey wore a wavy green cape, topped with starry glitter. Her chocolate brown hair tied to a messy bun, while her blouse matched her grassy eyes. Ending it off are blue pants that match the earthly aesthetic Kelsey is possibly going for.

“Ms. Kelsey, hello. May I have a few quick words with the classroom?” Alex politely asked. He suddenly jumped, realizing something crucial. “Oh right! I could’ve done this!” he exclaimed out loud. “Alex Wilson…?” Kelsey questioned, clearly confused in Alex and Bruno’s abrupt break-in. “Have you seen Aster Jonquil anywhere? Had he excused himself to the bathroom anytime?” Alex asked. Kelsey shook her head diligently. “Oh, no!” she denied.

Alex twisted himself to look at the students of Class 4. Standing in front of them, as if he’s their leader instead of Michael. “Have any of you seen Aster? Anyone?” Alex urgently questioned. He had a sorrowful face that Bruno never saw before—perhaps no-one else either as the people of the classroom collectively were stunned.

Murmurs washed the classroom. Even Kelsey wanted to join it judging by her tensed-up body language. Among the students speaking to each other were Pasha and Toby, Bruno’s old friends who he broke up with earlier that day. As soon as his eyes scanned them, he recoiled. Thoughts regarding them and other members of his friend group flooded him. He could swear his eyes were flashing back to ‘the good old days’. It only took what felt like hours for someone to answer Alex.

“No. We haven’t seen him since the period started.” Edgar, a student in gray, said. “He always does this… But never for this long,” another student dressed in green added.

Bruno was still wincing at the sight of Pasha and Toby. Alex turned to view Bruno’s disgruntled face. It only took another student’s input to wake Bruno up. “He just walked out of class! I tried stopping him, but he insisted that he wanted to see Blossom for a minute,” a redhead boy said. He was Aster’s seat partner. This could be told by the empty seat siding him.

“Wait? Where!?” yelled Bruno urgently.

The students in front of him trembled as he yelled. Even some could be heard with gasps. “In… Blossom’s class…” the boy answered with silent words in between. Alex stepped towards Bruno and had a fiery, passionate expression. “Then we must investigate Class 3,” he said while tapping Bruno’s shoulder, then expanding his hands to cover Bruno’s shoulder blades. “Thank you,” he quietly added.

Then one pale-colored student spoke up. He scoffed and said, “Why are you doing this anyways? Michael and Brody should be the ones looking!” The two named people woke up from their silent slumber and stared at the boy, who was sitting across from them, behind the row that they were sitting in. Brody was visibly angered, while Michael was a lot calmer. “No. They’ve got the wholly rights to. Not only that, but Mr. Baker could’ve easily given them permission,” explained Michael.

Bruno was smiling. Not only did Michael save his skin once, but now twice.

“Yes.” Brody added blankly. He didn’t see Michael, but he could tell that Michael also wanted some input from him. “Whatever,” the pale student hissed.

Alex groaned loudly at the conversation that just occurred. He soon took himself out of the room. However, he didn’t go as quickly as Bruno did. Bruno merely heard what was going on before leaving.

Rushing to Class 3, Bruno could feel like he could trip at any moment. Luckily, he didn’t. He reached the classroom the same time as Alex. They were breathless as the door flung open.

For a split second, the duo could hear the hefty words leave Albert, the teacher at the classroom. “And that’s how you get—”

“Has anyone seen Aster and Blossom!?” Bruno yelled.

The sudden increase in volume irritated everyone in the room, including Alex, who was standing just behind Bruno. It could be told by their shared faces of discomfort, or even fear.

“Bruno, please calm down,” Alex begged softly.

Despite his friend’s words, Bruno was breathless. He could be mistaken for a marathon runner for all he knows. Sweat was felt by Bruno’s hair—something he somehow inherited from his father. “Sorry,” he mustered up saying among his panting.

Bruno was bent down and rushed on his way inside, so he didn’t have a clear view of anyone in the classroom. All he could sense now are their fragile voices.

“What are you doing here? I’ve already—”

“We’re looking for Aster Jonquil and Blossom Sakura, if Bruno didn’t tell you well enough,” Alex quickly answered the voice back. The squeaky voice that preceded Alex’s was, as he kept assuming, the leader of the class’s voice—Peppermint’s.

“Is it any of your business?” another voice rose, along with a chair’s ear-piercing squeal.

It was at this point that Bruno’s body awakened itself, for it had heard a voice that it never wished to hear again. It was Nathaniel, the cocky kid who he encountered earlier that day in the bus ride to school. Bruno’s mind was filled with thoughts about him, and how Blossom was his classmate. It was no wonder that Blossom knew how to deal with him—because she had to since Nathaniel moved away from Brooklyn. His vision was purely and sharply focused on Nathaniel.

“It’s our business as students in power!” Alex barked back.

“Hold on!” Albert shouted.

The words had frozen everyone, even those who weren’t speaking.

“What’s going on here?! I've taken the initiative to take over the missing teachers' period, then you two, the ones who are supposed to be investigating, barge in as if you own the school!?” he continued while sometimes pointing at the chalkboard covered with numbers and lines that resemble graphs and equations.

Bruno cleared his throat as though starting an intelligence-insulting speech. “Albert, we’re doing that right now, like, at this moment now,” he talked back with some long words. Albert twitched his eye. His eyebrow followed movement once his right flied to the edge of his flat hair. It’s obvious that Albert was fairly offended, but it didn’t matter to Bruno. He just wanted to prove a point of his own perspective.

“Listen, Aster and Blossom have gone missing! Mr. Baker tried to look for them, but he didn’t,” Alex explained, trying to brush off Bruno, who tempered Albert. The teacher turned blank and blinked only once. It only took him so long to break his own silence. “Oh. He *did* come here earlier, yes,” he confirmed, seemingly to himself. Despite that one statement, he didn’t continue speaking. Only staring at Bruno. The only sound that could be heard were the white noise of the air conditioner in the room, as well as faint conversations from other rooms of the floor. The louder ones were believed to be from a panicking Class 2, worrisome about their king and price going on a death-defying investigation.

Suddenly, the still atmosphere was broken by the humble vocals of a familiar student—one that Bruno would know the world of. “Wait! Bruno!” it called out.

Bruno, recognizing the voice, took a snap of a finger to find who spoke. It was Evan Davis, the most sympathetic member of the friend group he recently broke up with. His face of frustration died out, transforming to that of regret and shock. Evan was the closest person he’s had to a best friend since the first one he considered in kindergarten. It shouldn’t be a surprise, then, that Evan wanted to help his old companion out, even if he shattered Bruno’s heart. Although that could be the reason why Bruno was so stunned at the sight of Evan. He had a scarlet face, one if touched can cook an egg. His freckles were finally identifiable thanks to a change of color in his cheeks.

Evan swallowed. In an untidy manner, he said, “I did see Blossom the last time I was arriving back from a trip to the bathroom, then... I-I saw her with Aster! They were going downstairs. I wanted to ask her where she was going, but it was too late. They were downstairs and Aster, let alone Blossom, couldn't hear me,” Bruno’s pupils turned to peas that are colored brown. His hair somehow turned more chaotic than usual. Evan shuddered upon watching his broken friend growing anxious every second he spoke. “I-I'm sorry..,” he apologized with a fragile voice. Bruno couldn’t tell if Evan was expressing regret for disheartening Bruno in the past, or for the current moment where Evan wasn’t of much help to Class 2’s matriarch. At the same time, Bruno felt like he was winding up to be delusional. It was a horrid sensation that he couldn’t ignore. Nonetheless, his right eye twitched, then his mouth stretched, yelling out “WHAT!?”

Evan chucked himself and his sulking chair slightly back as soon as he heard that single word. His mouth was trembling. “I wanted to stop her! But I really feared Aster. Class 4 members are so much stronger than us... Even if he was a former Class 1 member.” Evan recounted further. His voice turned much hollower upon saying “Aster.” A shudder could even be heard.

Alex was frozen solid. It was clear that he was coming up with all sorts of possibilities. All the ways Aster and Blossom could’ve been killed, stuck in detention or snuck out of school. Everything was equally awful as the other. Aside him was Bruno. Contrasting the anxious Alex, Bruno was tense. His teeth were grinding. Eyebrows were narrowing down to his eyeballs. His freckles clenched, accommodating a pout Bruno made out.

“We—Must—Find—Them—At once!” commanded Bruno.

What ensued was silence. Bruno didn't know if the class was shocked or showing how uncaring they are of their missing classmate. After all, Blossom didn't seem to be the most well-liked student—especially by her peers at Class 3. At the very least, he can tell one definitely never fancied her. Nathaniel, the wealthy kid who ridiculed Bruno during his bus ride to school. The one who Blossom fought again. That same boy broke the silence as well.

"Why *must* you find them?" Nathaniel asked, mocking Bruno with the emphasized 'must'.

"Yeah? Everyone saw them bully you," another boy added in agreement. It was the student sitting next to Nathaniel. He wore clothes mostly brown in color, including his beanie.

"It doesn't matter!" shouted Bruno. "Nobody in this school gets it, do they? Oh, nobody in this world gets it!" Bruno had a disgusted tone while saying that. There was a sense of irritation in him. No point in trying to convince some teens to change their minds about prejudice. At least, according to those thoughts that hovered around Bruno's mind. "Come on," Bruno soon grimaced. He rushed himself out into the corridor, wishing to have never even moved his soul to Class 3. Deep down his broken heart, however, was a longing for his friends there and the one he recently visited. If he went on further there, he could've easily cried and let all his inside emotions out. In the same vein, snapping angrily too is possible.

While it was a nearly mile-long distance from the class's door, Bruno had heard something that would likely get him to return. As if it was an advertisement begging to be noticed. The familiar, once comforting, voice of an old friend—Elias.

"What's going on with Bruno? He's not usually this selfless."

Bruno felt his eye twitching as he pulled the brakes on his feet. Maybe even an eyeball falling off at the same time, but that pain would be better than the immense once he was experiencing then. Something mildly reassuring came after. Silently from where Bruno stopped, yet sounded so clear, Alex made the loud pompous 'hmph!' that he tends to produce. What truly fluttered Bruno's soul was the fact that Alex was using it on some students who deserved it. Alex shortly strolled out of the classroom. Bruno quickly turned back upon hearing what he initially thought was a grunt, to find a discontent Alex.

"Well… The only option we have left is following our noses," Alex said, obviously defeated now that past opportunities to gain clues had turned to zero. "… Or ask someone who did before," he considered too after a moment of stillness.

“Didn’t you just say that scents run away fast?” Bruno argued.

“Didn’t you hear what I last considered?” Alex talked back.

Bruno frowned with a strong weight before saying, “Fine,” Alex could feel a lazy moan from Bruno coming. It never happened, though.

They took off, stepping towards the staircase, descending, leading to the way to the first floor. Bruno had memorized how it looked like. Expectedly, it didn’t change—it shouldn’t have in under a day. As colorful and childish as it was when he last came. The only difference was the objective he was trying to complete. Last it was completely finding his lost teachers, by now he had added finding his lost bullies on top of that.

Once Alex let his feet touch the quartz tiled floor, Bruno arched his head around the equally blank ceilings until it applied the brakes upon spotting someone. It was Alex, who turned impatient. “Smelled anything?” Alex asked. “Nope,” Bruno blankly responded, still focused on detecting *something*. Alex scowled before loudly sniffing, making it clear that he smelled unlike Bruno. He didn’t listen, continuing to search for, possibly, someone to borrow advice from.

Alex began to walk away from Bruno, then overstepping the boundaries of the school building itself, reaching the outdoors. The movements didn’t go unnoticed. Bruno followed Alex after finishing his disappointing investigation of the level, by jogging. Like how Bruno was ill-intent on encountering someone to inquire, Alex wished to discover Aster and Blossom by the pure scent of lemon. As expected, nothing was to be found, at least to Bruno. Really, he only felt the razor grass beneath his toes. It was painful but comforting to touch at the same time. Strange feeling it was. The shade of grass was deep, almost a darker shade of jade.

Bruno, with the help of his neck, lifted his head to suddenly observe upon a vibrant and diverse set of swings, a bunch of bright daffodil yellow slides, and two basketball hoops. His expression grew fond of a time when he used to play with his old pals. It was an amazing, nostalgic feeling, that is sadly so out of reach that it can’t be retrieved anymore. His heart turned to fragments at that moment of realization.

Trying to ignore his depressing thoughts and feelings, he suggested, “Maybe they wanted to play in the playground and forgot the directions?”

Alex finally saw Bruno after a while of no eye contact. “Isn’t unlike them,” joked Alex. Bruno tried to hold in a giggle. It lightened his inside mood just hearing that.

The duo dived into the playground. After many moments of searching, nothing was found. Only dust being collected until the next bundle of students arrive to damage everything.

“Weird,” Bruno interjected following the conclusion of the search.

Alex spun his head to finally spot someone. It was the janitor, mopping the dusty carpets to the right of the entrance to the first-floor corridor. Bruno and Alex gasped in unison, the latter pointing lightly at him. “Oh! The janitor,” Bruno squealed, extending the ‘r’ in janitor.

Bruno dashed right to him, while Alex, in contrast to Bruno, took his time reaching the janitor. “Hello!” Bruno squeaked.

The janitor was the same man from earlier, specifically in the gym when Class 2 were trapped in there. He was the only staff accompanying them, which was a good shard of comfort to the students. Now, he is yet again a light to the hopeless darkness, but this time in the search for Aster and Blossom.

“Hm? What do you want this time?” the janitor asked, obviously bothered. Although it wasn’t to Bruno.

“Er… Have you smelled any lemons lately?” Bruno asked nicely.

“Lemons?” he questioned in the most expressive tone he’s had all day. The janitor blinked. He kept shifting his head left and right, as if he’s looking for someone to lean on or if someone’s watching him. Then he returned to Bruno swiftly. He tried to get a whiff of something quickly. It was blatant that the janitor thought the teens he was talking to were, to say the least, crazy.

“Well, *no*,” he finally denied after a minute’s worth of hopeful anticipation.

Bruno’s smile drooped down to the sandy floor. His head itself did the same. Alex didn’t, however. He kept his neutral face intact.

“Janitor Sam, have you seen anyone anywhere, at least?” he attempted to negotiate. The name-drop of ‘the janitor’ didn’t exactly wake up Bruno the way Alex expected. On the other side, the janitor only shook his head.

“Not since little kiddos came here, no,” he kept declining. “Alright…” a demented, defeated voice emitting from Alex said. He took a good sigh, and walked away from the shadows that covered him, Bruno and the janitor.

Bruno aptly follows his leader after taking one last judgmental look at the janitor.

Once they stopped in the middle of the muddy field among the puddles that they just now noticed, Alex advised, “I think it's best if we try to smell it ourselves.” Unlike before, Bruno was hesitant. Hesitant to follow someone who kept flip-flopping their opinions on what to do. This could be told by the way his drooping mouth stretched to only his right cheek. His eye fell, then rose up, allowing Bruno to speak.

“Are you sure? You really are contradicting yourself here.”

“Aren’t *you* doing the same?”

“You convinced me!”

“And *I* convinced myself,” Alex snorted at the end of things. “Come on. Let’s stop wasting time.”

Bruno nodded, bearing the most obvious dejected look ever. He sighed loudly, Alex blatantly ignoring it. He watched as Alex kept trotting along, sniffing heavily, searching his best for lemons, almost like a dog attempting to find a lost toy buried in the ground. Bruno’s eyes danced around in its blank zone. It fluttered to the center, pulling on a bullseye on Alex.

“You were kind of delusional for thinking we'll find them by smelling lemons... I'm finding nothing but leads to hungry first graders!” instigated Bruno, once again trying to fire up another debate.

“Be patient,” Alex insisted. “Besides, *you're* more delusional for thinking that we could be best friends.”

That last sentence struck lightning. The ground was shaking, maybe even able to crack, just like Bruno’s heart. The hopes of befriending the leader of a class were torn apart right in front of his once rose-tinted view. He was stuck. It could’ve been mud sticking to his feet, or the discouraged toes that wanted him to gravitate.

It took long enough before Bruno finally got to his feet and ran to Alex, who was quite apart from him. The latter was staring down at the ground, at least it seemed that way to Bruno, before he came to meet up with him. Once he did, he found a trapdoor. Made of metal and had a handlebar right with it on the flat floor, it could be mistaken for a bunker entrance.

Alex sniffed for one last confirmation, before exclaiming, “There!” He snapped his left finger while the right pointed right to the trapdoor.

Bruno's mouth formed into a circle. He might as well whistle as he made out a "woah."

Alex backed away and squinted his eyes. Apparently, his square glasses weren't enough, or so it seemed.

"Hold… on…" he started, cracking in between. "It's… It's the school basement!" Bruno gasped. "Cool!" he squealed. But Alex wasn't experiencing the same joy and excitement as his peer. Instead, his once confidant expression developed to an anxious one. His mouth wanted to suppress itself as much as his eyeballs. "No! Bruno, this place is off-limits for a reason! It's dangerous!" Bruno's face went through the same transformation as Alex, as he sadly stated, "Oh… Not cool."

"Well, those two idiots are infamous rulebreakers, but I don't think I'd ever imagine them sneaking down there," scoffed Alex.

Bruno widened his eyes. His irises could be seen in full detail. "Maybe Terrance *did* kidnap them!" he concluded. Alex shook his head in full-speed motion. "No. No, they can't be," he denied in a horrified manner.

Bruno shoved himself closer to the trapdoor, but not too close in fear of being in the same state as his bullies. He could hear two voices. The first was a harsh, deep one.

"Great! Now we're going to die at the age of 15!"

It was Aster. Following it was a sweet, squeaky voice.

"Well... at least we'll be together, right?"

That must be Blossom.

"… I guess that's better than dying alone."

"If you're dying with me?"

Lastly, an "mhm" could be heard. At that point, Bruno backed himself away, as if he was pushed by an unknown spirit. "It's definitely them," he declared.

Alex had a grim face. It was that of pure uncertainty. His teeth grinded as he trembled, and his mouth rumbled. Bruno looked more bothered than anything though. "I thought you said you stopped caring about them."

Alex somehow turned back to normal, now scarlet and enraged. "Since when did I say that!?" he hissed. Bruno rolled his eyes. "Like, ten times today?"

Moments of tension-filled silence ensued before Bruno finally broke the ice. "Look, we can save them. Just be brave," he assured. "Easier said than done," Alex spat in response.

Bruno, instead of reacting, smiled wide, almost a smug one. Then, he wiped some non-existent sweat off him. “This might be a recipe for disaster, but I think we’ll be a-okay!” Alex finally had the same blazing determination as Bruno, answering back with “Yes. Yes, we will be!”

Suddenly… *“Oh great, what's going on up there!?”* It was Aster, filtered by sounds of the wind and distant echoes.

“I think they heard me,” Alex concluded. Bruno nodded. “Definitely did.”

They had one last supposed glance at each other. Both smiling. They knew that this could be the last time they’d ever see the light, but that didn’t matter. What did was that they had the chance to save lives or at least spread something about Aster and Blossom.

“Come on. Let's go in before Terrance catches up,” Bruno grinned. He began stepping in. Alex rushed in too once Bruno couldn’t be seen by the trapdoor.

The descend was seemingly deep. It was probably worth it, however.

Chapter 13
Lost and Found

Finally, they reached the end of the stairs down to the basement. As expected, it was pitch black which horrified Bruno to the core. Why? It's because his biggest fear is the dark, embarrassingly enough for him. Luckily, he stretched his arms to his red bag and managed to get out a handy flashlight he left in. The batteries were new, so there was no way it could go out… Unless something supernatural is going to be at play.

"Wow, how much stuff do you keep in there?" Alex asked.

Bruno stared at his backpack one more time. "Honestly, I don't know." He lifted his flashlight like it's a blazing torch. Alex looked ahead. "Well, looks like we don't have much time for dawdling. The basement looks as creepy as ever…"

The echoes grew clearer as they were walking closer to Aster and Blossom. Their muffled ramblings now sound more like cohesive conversations, though as cohesive as their talks can get.

"Quit singing, Blossom!"

"Sorry."

"It's certainly them in there," Alex pointed out after the whisperings from the cracking duo. "And the sky is blue! Of course!" Bruno sarcastically chortled.

They continued their trek. This basement is larger than Bruno had ever imagined. His old school didn't even have one, believe it or not… The fact that this branch has a humongous basement tells a lot! He was about to question on its size, but stopped himself since he didn't want to get distracted at all.

The walls were almost trapping them in. Concrete, beige, there was barely any color at all. It screamed monotone voices at them. There were only barren feeling or spikes of dread looming over their heads. Bruno's claustrophobia was surely going to get worse from this point onward, and he doesn't even have such a fear! The repeated environment uncovered from the shade… He wondered the whole time if the school is secretly like that. Very discreet if that's the case.

After some time, they found the room where the pair was trapped in. It wasn't actually as far as they had expected. Aster and Blossom were still chatting their life away through the door. Who even took them?

Alex coughed and spluttered over the dozen dust particles covering the doorknob. It couldn't even budge out. "Great," Alex snapped. "As if the work can be easy…"

The young genius keeps shifting then tapping his feet, switching between which one dances. His impatience was obviously growing, yet there was nothing to be done about it. All Bruno could do was stand still and think deeply about the situation that he put himself in. First, he decided to escape the Math lesson because he hated the subject, and not long after, he has put himself and his leader in the school basement… Deep down, he felt like maybe his soul wanted to guise it as escaping class too. What was wrong with him?

"Bruno, maybe you can break it?" Alex spoke, waking up the ordinary boy from his rumination.

He gazed at the doorknob. "Bruno?" his friend repeated, sounding increasingly concerned the more he spilled his name out in the open. Alarming noises rang from Aster and Blossom as they continued to talk, but now they were calls for help, specifically for him and his class leader.

A flash came into Bruno's brain. Stammers stormed about before he said, "Aster and Blossom could help us open the door."

"We're tied in here! Hello?!" Aster sarcastically screamed, filtered by the muffles behind the door.

Alex deduced it in his head. It made sense, he supposes, but the trapped duo had to strength their way through the ropes to make it work. But suddenly, Bruno lit up. "Of course!"

Soon enough, he traced his steps back, confusing Alex… And out of nowhere, he lunged towards the door with his legs, opening it! That made everyone's jaws drop.

"Bruno!?" everyone exclaimed.

Alex rushed into the barren room, only populated by Aster, Blossom, dust bunnies, a rusted iron bed which the former two were tied to and Bruno. "Oh my god! That was incredible!" Alex chuckled in pure awe. "I didn't even know you could be strong enough to open a locked door like that, Bruno!"

Bruno snickered. “I took taekwondo classes for a good two years, so I was *trained* to open doors like that.”

Then groans came from behind them—it was the kidnapped two. “Hey! Less talking, more rescuing!” snarled Aster.

Not even a second passed when Bruno and Alex dashed to untie them. It was an arduous process, but a worthwhile one, nonetheless. They managed to find and save their peers! It may not be the teachers, but at least two, even if bratty, teens were going to witness another dawn. When they were freed, there was tension in the air for plain as day reasons. Aster and Blossom were teasing Bruno and Alex the entire day, the latter for many ruthless years… Now that the victims were the heroes, are they in Aster and Blossom’s debt?

“Thanks,” Aster softly said.

“Yeah! We owe you!”

That made Bruno feel a bit flattered, but at the same time, he felt like he was obligated to save them for some reason. “You’re welcome,” an awkward grin came about. It might’ve looked fake, but it was as real as the Earth itself.

“It’s our sworn duty as class king and prince to help those in need, no matter in which class,” Alex declared. Then he replaced his professional expression with a tired one. “And Bruno *totally* wasn’t the one who suggested the idea of finding you.”

Aster gazed deeply at Bruno, into his merciful soul. “Really?” he sounded like he was begging for an answer. It would be confusing in his perspective, wouldn’t it?

Bruno bobbed his head. “Sort of. I volunteered to come too.” Then a question popped out. “Also, what happened?”

“Me and Bloss here were sneaking out of class together. Suddenly, we got knocked out and ended up here,” Aster answered reluctantly, indicating the hollow, gray concrete walls of the room they were trapped in earlier. The girl shuddered. “I think we got kidnapped!”

That made Alex scoff loudly. His disapproving glare met the eyes of the two troublemakers. “Why would anyone kidnap you? At first, I thought you just escaped class and just got locked in the basement… Until I saw the rope there,” he hissed.

That questioned quite stumped the duo and feared Bruno. If some high school bullies got kidnapped, he and the class leader could very well be next… Although they already were walking in the lion’s den as prey.

Soon, out of the blue, there were echoing footsteps beaming from afar. They were heavy, obviously not one of a child. Could it be the kidnapper?

Since the door was opened, shadows could be seen, made out of the light emitting from Bruno's handy flashlight. And one appeared. A figure of black, imitating that of a lanky, decrepit man, hunching forward, possibly searching for his victims through the chimes of their voices.

"No way…!" Blossom bellowed.

They sprinted at the door, Alex swiftly slamming it. It wasn't without making a boom, yet it still was an effective way to survive.

"Stay still, all of you… Unless he says *anything*," Alex ordered faintly.

And so they did. They waited and waited. Hearts were racing. Sweat glands were heavy at work. Lost eyes turning dazed. Thoughts running rampant in the foursome's heads like an insane uninvited guest in a party. The pressure of the low-quality door behind them was fully felt. It seemed like it took centuries for any indication that the man was even there, not until a certain word was spoken.

"I could've sworn I heard them…" The dull voice was strangely unexpected. It sounded tired. A snap soon came from him. "Aster, Blossom!"

Said pair gasped in unison, quickly covering themselves after.

Ominous chuckles came by… It didn't match the muted tone of the male. "You can't trick me this time, you foolish teenagers. I'm not dense!" The voice grew more blazing with every word. Silence came before he spoke again. "I can smell you… Bruno and Alex…"

That made the two named kids' skins crawl. How does he know them? And the fact that it's their smells that brought him to that conclusion… It was the recipe for an uncomfortable time.

Clearly, the man was about to spout more words, but it was stopped by Aster who had even more passionate vocals. "Shut up, dude! We're here, now leave us alone!" They all swallowed together, including Aster. He appeared to have spoken by accident.

Without any warning… The door was being banged on! Nearly, that pushed Bruno, Aster and Blossom with immense force, but their feet held on. Alex could only stay there because he was sticking to the doorknob. It was quite the cacophony.

"Open the DOOR!" the man screamed.

Alex could still glue the door to its steel hinges using all his strength. "What do you want from us!?" he yelled.

The door stopped moving. “So you *are* here… Is your new friend present too?” he asked. Alex glanced at Bruno, who shook his head. They stayed silent though…

A bang suddenly came to the door. It was from the raging man. “Answer me!” he ordered, his lungs almost breaking out of his chest.

“We’re all here, ok!?” Alex cried. Aster began to whimper a bit. Quite unexpected from him.

“Bruno, Alex, Aster and Blossom,” he listed off as if he was reading a checklist. “Incredible. Just as I wanted. No…” A moment of silence commenced. “It’s what the darkness wanted…”

“The darkness?” Bruno whispered as subtly as he could to his peers. They seemed to be as perplexed as he was. What was going on?

“Don’t get your knickers in a twist, kids. You’ll be fine,” the voice chuckled maliciously. It was so obvious that it was an ill-intended laugh, yet it was strangely comforting at the same time, so much so that Bruno had to push away the desire to join his snickering. “Trust me. Follow me.”

“Who are you!?” Alex asked in an accusatory manner.

“I’m your school’s worst nightmare. Look, I just need you alive for… someone,” he answered. “But why should I even treat you well, you insolent children?”

Before Aster and Blossom could say what they wished, the border between the man and the teenagers began to break down. The banging got more and more violent as he started to try to move it. Alex tried to reinforce it back, somewhat with the help of his schoolmates, but it wasn’t all too effective.

Boom, bang, bang…

Finally, after some fighting over the control of the door, it took the side of the man as he fully pushed it to the inside. It almost crushed Bruno who was in the middle of it! Luckily, Alex pulled him away. “What the hell!” Aster exclaimed.

The man arrived… He was just as the flashlights suggested how he would look… Thin, shabby, almost hunchbacked. His hair was revealed to be straight, drabby, long and black enough to be his head’s shadow. Complimenting his look was his blood red jacket over a charcoal plain shirt… His pants could even match his top in color.

“Terrance…” shuddered Alex.

“That’s Terrance!?” Bruno screamed.

Indeed… The man was the infamous Terrance!

"RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!" Blossom declared.

And they followed what she said. They were cheetahs running for their lunch, except they were the prey. Passing the obvious kidnapper who tormented the youth in New York City for the past decade, they kept looking back if he was still chasing them. How did he even escape prison? Although they can't judge the cells too much since he was so quick to even keep up with them. Alex was in the front while Blossom was at the back in the tight concrete labyrinth.

"Don't be so scared!" Terrance taunted in a babyish tone. The echoes couldn't even fabricate his voice. "I'm just trying to help a great cause!"

"What great cause?!" Aster fought back with his words.

"Aster, shush!" Blossom quietly shut her friend down.

After what felt like centuries of running through the basement, they finally reached a dead end… Which spelled death itself.

They kept panting like crazy, continuously twirling their heads around to find the ruthless kidnapper, yet he was nowhere to be found.

"Where is that weird man?" Blossom asked.

"Gone, I hope," Alex snapped back. "I've had enough of all this running!"

"At least we escaped that boring room. I'd rather die than stay there…"

Alex, Aster and Blossom's background bantering was drowned by Bruno's intrusive thoughts about Terrance. He could've died there, though it's not like he didn't dance with death earlier that day. Still, it was traumatizing. His sweats were screams and tears from his skin, begging for him to escape for once, but he couldn't. Like his peers declared, they were stuck at a dead end. At least Terrance wasn't there.

"It's good that we lost him. I was really about to lose my breath," Alex said.

Blossom nodded, finally something to agree with Alex, though Aster kept being unresponsive.

For the flash of a minute, they could hear footsteps from the gravel on the floor… Until it died away in the pitch darkness ahead of them.

Aster groaned loudly. "This is getting ridiculous…!" He sharply turned his head exactly to Blossom. "You know, we wouldn't even be in this mess if you weren't so curious about the lilac scent."

"How is it my fault? It's such a lovely smell!" Blossom whined.

"Well, you two should've decided on not going together," Alex complained.

That made Aster snarl at Bruno and Alex together. "Dude, it's Bruno who came up with the idea of saving us, right? *You* agreed to it! So don't argue with us here."

Bruno's heart fluttered. Was Aster finally defending him?

"And don't think you're so innocent too, nitwit. You…" Aster was at a lost for words… Indeed, what did Bruno do so wrong?

"Have nothing against me? Hah!" snickered the blue boy.

Alex growled. "You shouldn't be so accusatory against us. At least we're trying to do *something* to stop this stupid situation. You two are being so useless!"

"Hey, I'm trying!" Blossom yelled, repeating in the walls of the hollow basement. That made her short friend give her a bit of a side-eye which embarrassed her. "*We're* trying."

"Guys, can we stop the arguing?" Bruno finally declared as a slam against the others.

"Fine, but I made valid points against you and Alex, therefore, I am the best and *most smartest* person in the room, and thus you should be listening to me." Aster's quick and blunt words could not be any more painful to Alex's ego. It was so striking that it sliced through Alex like a knife, making him look like he just got wounded by a samurai. "Are you *joking* me!?" he sounded winded while yelling.

"We are always joking," Blossom sniggered, but it was sharply stopped by Aster. "No, we are *not* always joking." That made the girl roll her eyes. "Can I say something cool for once?"

Yet again, more back-and-forth arguing erupted. It was a kindergarten class down in the basement at this point and Bruno was the poor teacher. The echoes in the wall blistered the ears of the ordinary boy, to the point where he just broke.

"Can we just QUIET DOWN AND FOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND!?" he snapped boomingly.

Despite the unexpected yelling, Alex, Aster and Blossom did not seem too bothered by it. As a matter of fact, their eyes were still on each other, and their harsh minds were still out for blood.

"Ok… What is it that you want us to do, *Mr. Vanilla*?"

"Oh, I don't know, you *nerd*. Why don't you just calculate us a way out of here?!" Bruno smacked back at Alex, now infected by the same rage that filled the hearts of his surrounding mates.

Alex snarled deeply. "How… Dare… *You*!" Every word came from a venomous tongue.

"Oh, I dare so. Now, what are we going to do? You're the smart one after all. I'm just your average Joe Schmo, while Blossom is some… Girl and Aster is obviously an idiot," Bruno said as if he was listing himself. Suddenly, he grasped himself to the ground. "Sorry," he apologized as he turned red. It was true that he kind of lost himself there, but at the same time, how could he not? He has to work with a pair of bickering boys and a clueless girl! And he was so close to breaking after the harrowing day that he began to question if every working day was going to end up like this.

"It's fine. I like being called *some girl*!" Blossom grinned.

Aster, on the other hand, was totally not impressed, but he stayed quiet anyways because he knew Bruno would speak up a lot more if he did.

Then, with Alex, he seemed to have ignored Bruno's speech, only listening to the beginning after some deep inhaling and exhaling. "We should just… go another way. We'll eventually find the exit."

"What a master plan! Give a round of applause for the straight A student who can't even come up with a decent escape plan," Aster sarcastically snapped.

Alex growled. "You come up with a better one, then!"

"How am I supposed to? I can't come up with anything. After all, your good friend here *did* call me an idiot," Aster barked back.

Alex gave a striking glare at Bruno, then back at the short boy. "I don't care…" His defeated tone gave his mental state away. "Just follow me."

Soon enough, they all did what was instructed. Alex led the way, straight in the front line. All Bruno could see was the dandelion yellow beanie sitting on top of his leader. Walking past the endless solid walls, it was like they're in a gray infinity room. Even the ground was the same color.

Blossom started to feel a bit queasy, which her short friend noticed. "You ok?" he asked quickly as she put the brakes on herself, soon falling. "Bloss?"

"I don't feel so good…" she muttered.

Bruno and Aster both paused, then stayed still as they stared at her, soon the latter bending down. Alex, however, continued his trek, appearing to scoff at what was going on.

"Hey, don't worry about me…" she chuckled.

But Aster didn't want to listen. While he did seem to be the apathetic type, he did seem to care deeply about his good friend who was in gastral pain. It was clear from the tone of his broken voice, his faint tears that could blend into sweat and the speed of his motion itself.

Suddenly, his hips sharply twisted as he stood straightly. His dark eyes met the narrow gaze of Alex's chocolate ones, who turned his back as he sensed the change in stance. "Come on, we got to do something about Blossom!" Aster urged him.

But the cold expression worn on Alex's face was the reply.

"Dude, this is serious! She's not only going to puke, she could seriously—"

"She's *Blossom*, she can handle it," Alex sneered.

The girl gurgled in her acid while Bruno watched, petrified.

"Yeah, *sure*," retorted Aster. "If she dies, the blame is on you. Her rich uncles can sue you!" Alex jeered even more. "Why is she suddenly nauseous anyways?!"

The boy in blue sighed. "I think it's because we've been walking in a gray void… A void with darkness in front of us." He might've not wanted to admit it, but he was also getting quite dizzy too. The addition of stress from escaping a kidnapper didn't make things better.

"And it's not like pressuring us to go quicker is healing her," Aster added.

The genius rolled his eyes though. "Fine. Bruno, drag her along. I don't want Aster touching her with his grubby fingers."

Once Bruno began to grab Blossom by her armpits, Aster brusquely yelled, "I don't have *grubby* fingers! For your information, they're as pristine as diamonds." Alex hollered, "Really? Well, I'm the leader anyways, so I can say whatever I want."

"Damn, corruption even runs in the school… And not as a disease."

"Oh, how dare you—! Say that again!"

"You heard me, man."

The bickering between Alex and Aster went on like a record spinning over and over again while Bruno keeps trying his best to pull Blossom, trying to not get her to fall apart on the way to the light. It was no easy task because she was so tall. With Bruno's medium size, his hands couldn't clutch the heavy weight that her long

feet had to hold. Still, he amazingly could continue to grab her along, wiping through the leftover pebbles from the leaking walls.

Echoes of blabbering waved through the ears of the teenagers behind. The front of the imaginary car was a quarrel between a married couple while the back were the poor innocent children who had to witness it. Nobody noticed it, but the surroundings did seem to have a bit more of a varied look to it. There was a better contrast between the pewter-gray stones, the bister dirt and the slight fawn sand. Yet, Blossom still was sick to her stomach.

And as the darkness lurks further in front of them, so does Alex and Aster as they squabbled so much, they ignored the two friends at their backs and went straight into the shadows.

"Guys!?" Bruno yelped helplessly.

No response other than the continued argument. Luckily, he still had his trusty flashlight… But what did *they* have? It was a shock that they didn't even give themselves a timeout!

In a panic, he began to breathe quicker, growing shallower and shallower. After, he gave a good glance at Blossom, followed by a longing look, worried spurred around him transforming into a tornado. "Good mother…" he inhaled.

"Don't worry, I'm getting better now," the girl assured joyfully.

Finally, she sprang herself up, no need for support at all. It was a pleasant and welcomed surprise.

"That's good…" Bruno continued to wheeze.

"No need to worry! Come on," she insisted again.

He found himself some time later. "Sorry," he whispered. Her hand met Bruno's left shoulder. "It's fine!" she coughed. "Where are those two?"

"Don't know," he answered. "What happened to you? Did your stomach get better after, like, a second?"

Blossom chuckled hysterically. "Oh, my tummy just gets like this sometimes! It's sensitive to environments like this… But especially to milk."

Bruno could piece together what she meant… "You're lactose intolerant, aren't you?"

The grin worn on him rubbed off on her before she brushed it off. "Well, I just don't like spaces like this. Very claustrophobic." That made the boy nod. "Agreed, and I don't even have claustrophobia!"

After the two had a hardy laugh, they gripped themselves to reality. “Let’s try to find those nitwits now!” Blossom joked.

“They should be way ahead. Didn’t follow them because I thought you were still sick,” explained Bruno.

That made the sweet girl blush once they started walking. “Aww, you wanted me safe?”

“I just don’t like to see anyone hurting. That’s why I decided to save you and Aster even after all you’ve done. Alex doesn’t see what I see, though… That’s why they’re feuding against each other, I bet,” Bruno told her.

Blossom thought about it thoroughly for a bit before speaking back. “I think it’s also because they used to be friends.”

“Of course! Alex told me he used to be a member of Team Toxic… He used to be close with you and the shorty, right?” interrogated Bruno.

“Yep,” the girl affirmed. “Honestly, Alex is not that bad of a guy… Neither are you… But Aster… Holds grudges. He thinks otherwise.”

“Really? You don’t see me that way?”

Blossom shook her head profusely. “No!” The tone of her voice told everything. It was genuine. “I mean, I did somewhat agree with what Aster said. Newcomers should know how the school runs, but… Yeah, he does sometimes go too far.” She said it so quickly, it seemed like she didn’t even want to admit it.

“*Sometimes*,” Bruno snorted. “What grudge is he holding against me anyways? I literally did nothing! Other than maybe enter his classroom, but how should I know?”

At that breaking point, Blossom stopped all of herself, which caused Bruno to soon follow. He turned back to find the girl, trembling. Pale whimpering could be heard emanating out of her. It clearly wasn’t cold, so why is she shivering like they’re in the North Pole?

“Blossom?” Bruno softly called.

She continued to stare at him as if she had just witnessed him commit a murder. Her breaths also grew shallow.

“*Blossom*?” he repeated, growing tense. “Blossom, what’s the matter?”

But she appeared to have ignored what he said. Her mind must’ve been in some other space at this point. “I don’t know why Aster hates you,” she admits. Fingers soon began fidgeting, her pupils pointed down to the closest pebble, yet her

eyeballs lingered on Bruno's. A wave of immense blinking crashed down. "I just know that he has something against you," then she retorted, "I really know *nothing*."

The ordinary boy scoffed indiscreetly but pretended to believe her just to not make things so awkward. "Alright."

"He tends to hold anything against anyone, no matter what they do," she continued pouring out even if unprompted, which made Bruno even more suspicious. Still, he acted like he's gullible. "Of course."

After he changed his direction to being forward, he beckoned her. "Come on now, let's just go. We'll lose the guy if we keep talking about him!"

Blossom nodded, turning back to her original self. What happened there? What Bruno knew happened was that he learned not to ask her, or maybe even the lost boys, any questions about their past unless they were clear about being open on it.

Anyhow, they followed the brightened path that Bruno's flashlight paved. It was a tunnel of possible danger and definite terror, but it also had a sense of mystique attached to it, much like the school itself. While Bruno favored that vibe for the campus itself, the basement was the opposite story. Darkness means that any enemy could be lurking nearby, or worse, anyone could be watching every move before they could pull the kill. *Only if Alex and Aster came to their senses.*

Blossom sighed deeply. "I want to go home… Seriously."

"Who doesn't?" Bruno chortled.

The girl gazed at him. "Aster and Alex don't. They want to stay here all day and gaggle at each other!"

Bruno's laughter bloomed even further. "You're not wrong!" That even gave Blossom a good grin. "You're better than I thought! You're even cute…"

She blushed, almost turning into a rose color. "Really?"

That made Bruno gain the same cheeks. His heart suddenly fluttered for some reason he can't explain, probably because he blurted out that last line. "Why did I say that?" he muttered to himself. His mind returned to his friend, affirming with a "yeah." He was feeling something he hasn't felt since the fourth grade… Something he doesn't wish to describe at that moment, but he knew exactly what it was.

"Ah, sorry, I—"

"No, it's ok!" she assured the panicking boy.

Bruno turned away from her, then chuckled to himself, soon silently moving on with his walk like nothing was said. Blossom didn't seem impressed, but had to follow him.

They passed countless empty walls. During that time, they could hear the echoes of the arguing increasing in volume. They were getting closer and getting quite surprised at how far they've been talking… As soon as they thought so though, the two gasped at a peculiar point not too far away.

"What the!?" Aster distantly exclaimed, his rusty voice telling how he felt.

Finally, after some baffling time, Bruno and Blossom reached their friends who were just paralyzed at what they saw, the former wanting to proclaim something but was stopped by his awe. It made sense as the destination was quite intriguing.

The teenagers were in a huge, almost round room with four tunnels in front of them. Where they were standing seemed to be the meeting point for these tunnels. All equally contained a sense of mystery, and the deadly kind. They were cloned to the core, dry and gray across.

Bruno was the first one to move, glancing at Alex. "What is this?"

"I thought this place was just a silly theory—a story—made up by the others… But I suppose not now…" Alex murmured, jaw-dropped.

Blossom answered him instead since Alex was a bit too vague. "It's the four tunnels of the basement. Not many of us have gone into the basement, so nobody actually knows this existed. For those who did somehow enter it, they saw it, but they weren't believed because it sounded so farfetched. Now we've all seen it with our two eyes!"

Aster jittered his neck. "Wait, what does this mean?!" His brain scattered around, translating into his body language as his motion turned rambunctious. That made everyone else start to move.

"That means we've gone a bit too deep…" Alex concluded grimly.

Bruno snarled, his gaze fixed upon his leader's. "It's because you and Aster won't stop arguing! You were so tunnel-visioned, literally!"

While Alex wished to back talk and blame it on Aster, even he wasn't blind enough to see that he was wrong. "Sorry," he breathed.

The purple-clothed boy rolled his eyes. "It doesn't matter. What matters is that we have to find our way out of here right now!" he urged. The snap of his head shook Bruno for a quick moment.

Blossom recollected herself by fixing up her dress. That's when Aster suddenly remembered that he had a friend beside him the entire kidnapping fiasco. "Bloss!" he exclaimed. His scrawny legs could somehow propel him fast enough to reach her for a warm embrace that even made the girl turn red.

After he let go of her, he frantically questioned, "Are you ok? Is your stomach well? You don't seem to be dizzy." She patted his shoulder calmly. "Yeah, don't worry. I'm stronger than you think!"

For once Bruno felt that Aster cared about something, or in this case someone, that being the tall girl in a floral kimono. There could be a possibility he saw something else in her too.

Meanwhile, Alex pierced his eyes even more into the fathomless tunnels, it slowly turning into mere slits. "If the stories are true, then maybe one of these tunnels can be useful to us."

"What story?" Bruno eagerly prompted.

"It's said that these tunnels are magical. They can change every time someone new enters this huge room. It's very random though, but one can lead a path to escaping the basement," the boy explained.

After a bob of his head, Bruno gave a look to the ambivalent Aster and Blossom, who were just focused on each other really, then returned to his friend. "Let's figure it out together then," he declared.

"That's an idea," Alex snorted. The other Class 2 student assured him, getting physically closer with footsteps. "Trust me. If we put our heads together, we can get out!"

Moments later, Alex, Aster and Blossom exchanged nerve-wracking eyes, silently communicating with the pure language of their pupils, before meeting at Bruno's. "Let's do it," they answered in unison.

So Bruno cheered visibly with the wide smile worn on him. Now a plan is coming into play, and he felt proud that it came up by him!

Chapter 14
The Room of Phobia

The youngsters stared forward at the four roads in front of them. There was a lot of pressure on them as, whatever choice they make, there's a good chance they'll end up in trouble. What really troubled Bruno is the wonderings about why the school even has such a basement, and it was a genuine question that he knew the veterans standing beside him couldn't answer themselves.

Darkness trailed away like candy laid out ahead of children, yet it wasn't so sweet. Spotty drops of water could now be heard above them, being a clock ticking for their inevitable demise. Frantic glances at the boy in blue's friends kept him as a statue since he was the most unsure about their fate. Really, it was all in their hands.

Or was it?

"Bruno?" Alex belted out. "Where do you think we should go?"

"Me? I don't know. You should," Bruno admitted.

But the genius's head shook. "I'm the one who got us in here."

He didn't even want to argue back anymore. His fear simply ate him up, not even considering the existence of Aster and Blossom, the latter of whom was at a shoulder's length away from him.

So, he did as his leader ordered. Examining across the foursome tunnel, his eyes landed on the fourth. "That one," he pointed to.

"Ok! Get on your feet, guys!" Alex commanded. Aster snarled. "Let's hope we weren't misguided!"

Ignoring the complaining, the four kids followed each other to the last tunnel, the one to their most right-hand side.

The trek was long, but not as grueling and brutal as the legitimate basement halls. It wasn't even as rudimental, rather filled with bricks and a smooth tiled floor. Perhaps the sayings about the tunnels being magical are true as the transition between materials seemed so abrupt. Nonetheless, the brick pattern did help break up the monotonous piles of bland gray concrete dressing up the walls of the rest of the basement.

And unlike the area, the tunnel did have an obvious end. A visible room… But nothing the vision of the four teenagers could figure out.

Floating around Bruno's head during the walk were theories that maybe the tunnels only were black earlier because the environment wasn't "generated" with its magic yet. Of course, it was only just a thought.

Finally, after what felt like hours, they reached the end of the bricks in favor of a curious cobblestone-walled with a boxing ring slapped in the center of it, a spotlight showing it off. Because of the spotlight, Bruno dropped his flashlight after shutting it down. What's even stranger is that the floor didn't even change at all.

The group were all at a loss for words before Bruno broke the ice. "Well, a huge boxing ring would be the last thing I'd expect seeing in a school, though there *is* a sparring class…"

After getting a grip on themselves, they shuffled through the room to scan the area. There was nothing to truly find though. What they saw was literal, no deeper meaning to it. Were they supposed to do something though?

Aster was about to exit without even informing anyone before slamming his whole body into the diamond-solid bricks. His teeth could've been crushed and fallen off! "What the hell?!" he exclaimed. That alerted everyone to the entrance, or to him the way out. Indeed, the door was closed! Though there was really no door, just an opening; So, it was covered by bricks. It was the magic's doing, no doubt. Now it turns out they were trapped in there.

"No way!" Blossom wallowed.

"And it's no door… We can't just find a key…" Alex concluded. "This basement, or whoever is controlling it, has the nerve," the grim tone of his next sentence gave Bruno genuine goosebumps.

Aster kept banging on the cave-in, but the effort was for nothing. No bricks even inched away. That made him growl, then bangs his own forehead in as if he just wanted to give himself a concussion. While that didn't happen, he still fell down to the dirty ground. "This sucks!"

"Oh, quit whining. I believe we have to do some teamwork then," Alex sneered.

The short boy got up, but only his top half. His head turning at the snap of a finger. "Excuse me? Teamwork?"

"Yay! We can bond over possible death!" Blossom cheered, not being clear if it was sarcasm or if she was actually over the moon. But Aster seemed dreadful of

working with them, even counting Blossom as his expression grew more exaggerated when she spoke. “Nobody here will catch me dead working with any of you!” The girl wailed. “Even me!?” That made her friend roll his eyes in a super blatant manner.

“Yeesh, something tells me we’re dealing with a sociopath,” Bruno faintly whispered to Alex and Blossom, though unsuccessfully as not only Aster responded, but the four kids were close to each other anyways. “I am no sociopath, *normie*,” he barked, not looking at anyone but the bricks. In response, Bruno just huffed.

Without saying any more words, the teens continued to visually investigate what’s going on and what to do. It was a mystery in of itself after all, and a mystery that didn’t have any obvious leads. That was the case until Bruno jumped into the ring’s rubber-padded platform, his baseball cap falling off, causing him to stretch his arm to grab then wear it. After a soft bounce from the spring, the left side of the box lit up in blue.

“Woah! That’s a clue!” Bruno declared as he noticed the blue light along with everyone else. As he was walking backwards to maybe find something else, he tripped on a hole that was indented, his entire chest hitting smack dab in the middle of it. “Well, this isn’t a good place to box…” Suddenly, parts of the bricks that blocked the entrance/exit fled into dust. That made Aster’s jaw drop.

Alex finally cracked it. Some small thoughts that chained together is really what made him come up with a conclusion. “Of course! We have to beat each other to open the door!”

“I guess hitting the grooves in here is what makes it open up?” Bruno questioned while he tries to find another.

“No, no, no. I believe it’s the force.”

“I did get seriously hurt…”

Out of the blue, Aster launched himself onto the ring, somehow landing perfectly on his feet like he’s a cat falling from a tall shelf. The show of dexterity made Bruno cower in fear, especially after what his bully proposed.

“I’ll fight you then.”

The declaration shuddered Blossom way more the actual opponent did. She felt she had developed *something* with the newbie. And now he’s getting ganged up on by her best friend.

“Fine,” Bruno accepted with a spit and with the dramatic throwing of his baseball cap, landing beside Alex’s feet. Soon it’s followed by his fire-red bag, also flung next to his hat. “It’s not like I’d care who I’d be kicking today anyways since I want to do it to all of you… After all this garbage put on me.”

The boy’s confession set Alex and Blossom’s brains ablaze, but they didn’t feel like speaking up since a match was starting.

The first blow was from Aster, who was eager to punch Bruno the entire day—now he has the opportunity to, and with the banner of “helping others” by having the battle be a means of escaping the basement and finding the teachers. The poor average boy didn’t prep himself for the sudden hit. Nobody even counted to the beginning of the match since the two other kids were so distraught with what he said.

Soon enough though, Bruno struck back with another hardy punch. But a signature move he learned was, of course, his taekwondo tricks. It may be a boxing ring, but he didn’t think it had to be specifically about boxing, was it? That didn’t look to be the case. No consequences were had after his foot made sharp contact with Aster’s chin. His brooding ink hair took a brief flight.

After Bruno made a circle kick, Aster had enough and took the small opportunity to slap, paralyzing the boy, then having a kick of his own to Bruno’s shin bone. The victim then gave his bully a taste of his own medicine with a shin kick by him.

The fight started to flash second by second. Every sparking fist, every movement of their legs, every exchange of position was a millisecond worth of an experience. And during that whole time, they try to stop slipping on the gashes of the ring, only intentionally doing so when they’re blowing body-falling moves.

“No ordinary kid, huh?” Aster taunted. Bruno banged him with a hit on top of Aster’s head, the opposite of a volleyball throw. And like it, Aster’s head dropped to the rubber, followed by the rest of his body. That was Bruno’s answer, and it was a brutal one at that. He certainly wasn’t holding back, though it’s definitely because he was venting out his pent-up frustrations.

Continuing with his frequent punches, Bruno indulged in finally avenging himself to his bully, even if it’s been a day. Though he was so caught up in his revenge that he didn’t even hear the bricks falling off from the exit, but his peers did.

“You did it!” Alex called out.

At that striking moment, Bruno swished his head to gaze at the exit. His classmate was right—the tunnel was clear!

The boy let go of Aster, who was glued to the padded platform of the boxing ring, not realizing the many holes that they made deeper because of their violence. Every nagging feeling, now letting go of Bruno in the clarity of the scene.

"Let's go," Alex beckoned.

Bruno and Aster hopped out of the ring's ropes while Blossom slowly took her steps. The boys exchanged grim glances while one takes their bag and hat again to wear them, silently challenging each other. This rivalry isn't over yet.

Soon, in the flash of a second, the teens all escaped as quickly as they could, no thought required. Bruno kept wondering when he'll stop beating up Aster during that time while he was picking up his flashlight to use it again. Indeed, he enjoyed it, he really isn't the type of person to relish in causing pain. Nonetheless, he can't deny that the exercise was completely strange. Why did he even have to box someone?

The trek led them to square one, the main hub with all four tunnels standing ahead of them, filled with the darkness, not changing at all since they were last present. The paths now feel a lot longer, thinner. Harrowing. A source of all stories for lost children in school. While those anecdotes weren't prominent, the ones that do exist were the most memorable tales told by the local youngsters, and not in a good way.

Tiny bits of stones covered the shoes of the four trapped teenagers. Their hearts pumping, hoping not to encounter Terrance while coming up with an idea.

"We should just retrace our steps, guys," Aster suggested.

But Alex shook his head profusely. "It'll not be simple. We might get lost again!"

"Why does this basement have to be so big… And magical…" Bruno moaned.

While the boys were talking, Blossom approached the third tunnel, having a sense of longing for some reason. She touched the hard walls, smelling fear. A question came out. "Can we go here?"

The naïve tone of her voice softened the hearts of the young men. Her gaze was stuck on Aster though, which slightly offended Bruno but it's not like he cared much at that point. Alex reaches the edge of the path, touching it, feeling the pure stony nature of it. But what was notable for him was that same scent Blossom sensed—that of distress. His worried eyes grew more tense, narrowing, backing away to the same shoulder line as Bruno.

“That room is far from an ordinary one.”

“Ah, that’s right, Sherlock,” Aster snarked.

“No, no, no. Like, it’s really different. Really. Something’s off about it compared to the last one… And it’s not good,” corrected Alex, his voice trembling. Suddenly, he blurted, “I smell… C-cats!”

That made Bruno and Aster blink, then explode in laughter. No blame can be put on them. What they heard was just ridiculous! They only stopped once Blossom shuddered and spoke out. “I don’t smell cats… I smell a corpse instead.”

It instantly turned the two giggling boys from being hysterical to concerned like a light switch. “A corpse?” Aster’s hollow voice bellowed out.

Blossom started to sob and wail. “I-It… There’s y-your smell, Aster!”

When Bruno stepped in to maybe investigate what’s going on, he was also infected with a smell. “Dear Mother!” he yelped, leaping away.

While the others were panicking, Alex put his mind together. Soon enough, he came up with something. “Let’s go in,” he announced. This terrified the others. Go into where the smell of danger could be? No way! Even Alex could tell they were reluctant with the shine of their eyes.

“Trust me. The way out is likely the path that will be the least popular,” said Alex, his adamant tone told them everything.

The others thought about it for a solid moment. What could possibly go wrong is anything. Perhaps what they smelled could be real and they could be the targets of Terrance now, or even worse they’ll be trapped again and, judging by how the tunnel looked compared to the other, they won’t find a way out. It was still dark, unlike with the boxing ring being lit up once the four teens approached it. While they could wish to argue back, it’s not like changing the stubborn Alex’s mind would be an easy task in a couple of minutes, so they collectively nodded.

No words were said, but it was obvious they agreed to all get in. And they did with careful steps.

Every breath taken, every time the soles of their shoes hit the ground, anything felt have been slow. Their eyes patrolled for any danger, though their ears were more at work. No amount of precaution could help them feel better though. It was only Alex who was calm.

Paranoia had them tracking every sense they felt. A sinking feeling that danger loomed over them infested in their brains. Bruno was even getting sick in his

stomach, very much akin to Blossom earlier. One corner to another they spotted, it was shrouded in black, but they could only see fear.

What jumped them even more was Bruno's flashlight dying. The flickers matched the speeding heartbeat of the four before its breath went out. "Damn it!" Bruno snapped. Now they're in the blanket of shadows. Luckily, they can just head straight through the path but now lost the clarity the light gave them.

After some dreadful moments of walking, Alex suddenly hit the brakes on himself, causing his following friends to crash on his back like a domino, except nobody fell down. "What's the big idea?!" Aster snarled. But the boy in yellow didn't speak at all, only shuddering.

The light suddenly sprang to life, though only in the form of roaring lightning. Thunder boomed through the ears of the kids which shivered Alex. He was seemingly frozen in a fridge.

Before the others could interject anything, the expected rain wasn't that of water, instead with cats! The felines poured down to the floor, all landing to their feet and crowding around the teens.

"What in the world?" Aster gasped. Bruno was simply staring at what turned into chaos, being at a complete loss for words. The cacophony of the mewing cats drowned out any other sound made other than the thunder. "Aww! It's raining cats!" Blossom cheered subtly.

After the strike of lightning, Aster was propelled up, the Earth increasing in height underneath him. He yowled in fear. "Aster!" Blossom whined. "IT'S SO HIGH! NO!" the short boy cried as he curled himself on the top.

The volume of the cats and the thunder got even more blaring by the second. Alex broke himself before realizing something that he had to tell the others. "Guys… I know what this is!" As soon as he started, dolls propelled out of the floor, breaking the stone. They all flied on Blossom like a bunch of bees. That made Bruno believe that he'll be the next to have the magic happening to him. "It's the Room of Phobia!"

They all exclaimed in unison. "The Room of Phobia!?"

"Yes! The name explains itself! It's a room where it shows the deepest fear of the person in it! Or people in our case," Alex explained while running from all the felines.

As Bruno had predicted, his fear had manifested itself. And it was one that he would hate to experience. When he was standing still, the sorcery of the room

spawned tape that covered his eyes like a blindfold. Quite the sticky tape at that as, when Bruno tried to grip it, it wouldn't even budge at it. If anything, it caused him immense pain since the adhesion from the tape was holding on tight to him.

Blossom whinnied from the dolls who were all cackling together, floating around her while she's running through a marathon across the room. The cats, meanwhile, were set on terrorizing Alex, as well as the lightning that keeps nearly striking him. And on the top was Aster, who was still wallowing and on ice. Eventually, the girl made an impact on Bruno as she's on the run. "Sorry!" she bellowed. But Bruno didn't respond for he was only focused on the constant of the nothingness in his eyes. His head slashing at every angle, forming so many arcs. Blossom didn't get up, staring at Bruno blankly before the dolls attacked her chocolate hair.

Alex tried his best to climb on the cliff that formed because of Aster. He clenched on the rocks to his greatest efforts, and it did work out though not perfectly. Every heartbeat, his fingers could feel itself letting go. Only if he had the sharp claws of the cats following him. As he gazed up though, he had a level of comfort finding Aster, even if he's midway through the height between the ground and his hill. When he looked down to taunt the felines, he noticed that some are disappearing into mere clouds. A click came to his brilliant brain.

"Of course!" he exclaimed at his eureka moment. "Guys, just stop being scared!"

"Oh duh! As if he couldn't piece that out! Do you really think it's that easy, smarty pants!?" Aster sneered. That made Alex have a hardy huff. "We need to be together."

Blossom panted. "How can we be together? Bruno's blind, these stupid dolls are obsessed with me and Aster's literally on top of a mountain!" Her voice couldn't keep up with her motion at all.

"Where are you g-guys a-a-a-anyways?" Bruno stammered. He kept his act as a drunk zombie.

Alex sighed deeply. Nobody was even close to useful at all in this situation. They were all just paralyzed or worked up in their fears. So he did what he could do best: Work alone. He scanned the walls for any sort of secret exit that they didn't notice in the wake of the surrounding magic. A brief look again was how Alex managed to find it. A stab in the wall straight in the middle, albeit it was small, but they could crawl.

"Aster, come down, now!" Alex ordered with determination.

"How!? I'm going to die if I come down!" argued Aster.

Hesitantly, Alex held his hands up, his palms super visible to the agitated boy. "You can land on me."

The purple boy was close to snickering but knew that a dire situation like this wasn't the best time to joke around. So, after holding his breath, he sprang on the arms of his peer. His mass was underestimated for he was fairly heavy. So heavy that Alex turned into a pancake when Aster landed on his chest with his right foot. "Sorry," Aster sarcastically apologized.

Blossom leaped onto her long-time friend just in time for him to get up, the dolls latching onto both of the boys now. "Are you kidding me!?" Alex screamed.

While the others were distracted, Bruno was still wandering around aimlessly, both covered in fear and just lost. His mind losing itself. While the dark itself was his greatest fear, and he didn't want to admit it, he also has a deeper fear that he wasn't even considering… Why didn't the room manifest it though?

What it didn't conjure up though was a strange sensation. He was being grappled by something. Before he knew it, the blindfold on him was stripped off, scarring the line of his eyes and some eyelashes being taken away. He could finally see again, but how did it get removed? And how was he being dragged away? All he knew was that his friends weren't even paying attention, only trying to drive away the flying dolls while the cats were slowly dying one by one at the same time as the storm. He was inching further and further away.

His head turned back to find a familiar face: Terrance! He screamed loud before the kidnapper covered his mouth. "Help!" he called out, but it was too muffled for his bothered friends' ears. "Utter Darkness will thank me for this…" Terrance chuckled.

Bruno's thoughts raced at the same rate as his heart. The man had hinted at this before, and the poor boy is still perplexed on what use will he have for the devil himself. He is just Bruno. Plain. Nothing. He could feel himself fading away once his hat fell down and moving past the gaping exit.

It took some time for Alex, Aster and Blossom to notice. They grouped up together physically, which caused their fears to wisp away into the wind, not even noticing the absence of Bruno before it was too late. Alex was the first to figure it out.

“Bruno?” he called out.

They collectively turned their heads around, searching for the blue boy. “Where did he go?” continued the genius.

Blossom’s squeaky voice fixed her gaze on the hole in the wall, the supposed exit Alex had found earlier. But now there was something new on the floor. A pavement of blood with Bruno’s blue cap on top. They gasped together. “BRUNO!” Assumptions flung around the room, but one conclusion was reached: He was in danger! Or worse, killed. Terrance must’ve found them!

They followed the rough trail that Terrance was still walking on, firmly grasping on Bruno. His arms were tied by the man’s arms, but his legs could still be seen flailing around. Speaking was out of the question as all his wailing was equated to a mere muffle.

Aster growled while the others stood to comprehend what’s going on. Without a second thought, he pranced on Terrance, flattening him, letting go of the ordinary boy with the bang of his head. “You evil, loathsome murderer! How dare you try to kidnap us?!”

“Stupid children…” Terrance jeered.

Bruno scootered himself with his legs, sliding through the rough surface of the floor that was the same as the Room of Phobia.

“School teaches a lot of things, but not any consequences to be had in the future,” the kidnapper continued. “For what it’s worth, I need Bruno for him.”

“Who?” Blossom blurted out.

A psychotic chuckle was belted out though. The rasp of his voice dialed through the ears of the youngsters. “Utter Darkness, of course.”

“Oh, but he’s foolish too. Very blind to me. He may be an all-seeing demon, but you can trick a god,” he went on.

Alex jittered himself before speaking. “You’re really working for him, aren’t you? Why?”

But no answer came about. Just the silence that commenced. A heart-stopping one at that. He could only stare at the teens he tried to kidnap. “You know, I needed all of you, but Utter Darkness saw this excuse of a person as priority.” He snorted shortly after. A face of doubt was worn about his master. “But why should I tell you lot anything more?”

There was no more time to chat. Terrance had shot himself forward to get the kill on Bruno. It wasn’t successful, but Bruno had been plunged even further to the

ground. Blossom lunged herself to the man along with Aster. They were trying their best to cuff at him while Alex tried to pull his classmate out. The man was too strong however, having stood from crouching and flying the two kids far from him with the force of getting up.

With the insatiable desire to harm Bruno specifically, he shoved Alex away, dipping him into the boulders, then hurled himself at the boy, trying to cave his head in. No delicate dragging was in his head anymore, just the pure violence he wanted to watch. The psychotic eyes grew more gluttonous for blood. Bruno tried to kick his chest, but it was of no use. Terrance didn't move at all.

When Bruno finally got his head off the ground somewhat, Terrance had enough of beating around the bush and slapped him so hard that Bruno's neck could be heard snapping. His face now lying on the floor as stone, eyes closed. But before he fully blacked out, he could hear something peculiar and important…

"Bruno!" Alex cried.

Blossom could be heard sobbing as grunts of her and Aster indicated that they finally got on their feet.

And in the flash of a moment, more footsteps could be heard—not from where the kids are, rather on top of Bruno's forehead. They were hard and heavy. Finally, a wham came out, right on the cheek of Terrance.

For the chance of a second, Bruno marginally opened his eyes to find… Two adult men. One wider than the other. Both sharing the same eye and hair color of an ill-lit black. Their injuries were clear from their face alone.

"Don't you dare ever hurt our students," one of them sharply said.

Terrance recovered from the slap, though his pride was still shaken. He quivered upon getting up. "Bruce and Jack… How did you escape that cabinet?"

"We're not sparring teachers without a reason," one hissed.

Of course! It was the missing sparring teachers, Bruce and Jackie! They were finally found at last after the entire wounding day… But at what cost for Bruno? He was already feeling dead at the ground, and his barely opened eyes weren't feeling any better.

"Mr. Bruce! Mr. Jackie!" Alex, Aster and Blossom exclaimed together, pleasant surprise written over all their faces. They were battling the kidnapper with their raw muscles, the wider teacher speaking with his fists while the other stabbed with his lengthy feet.

“Kids, you can get out! We can handle this hooligan ourselves,” the punching man ordered

Alex shuffled his mouth. “But Bruno—”

“Take this boy with you!” the other spouted, busy dealing with the head of Terrance.

After a moment of hesitation, they concluded that this is what they had to do. Bruno had begun to fade into the caliginous view since then, not even being able to hear anymore. He had fainted, the last things he sensed was the mighty battle between the formerly missing teachers and their kidnapper.

Chapter 15
Medical Attention

An hour passed. Many worries arose from the moment, but at the same time, there was content in the air since the teachers, who were gone for the whole day, had finally returned where they're supposed to be. While they weren't any more injured than Bruno, he is the one much to be worried about since he does have so much of his life left compared to the older martial artists.

The school had to take Terrance to prison. Luckily, this was really the only time he managed to actually cause trouble on the campus. In reality, he was the fear of every child in Manhattan among many other Darkeners, ruthless worshippers of Utter Darkness, lurking around the world. Open Book School was just a sick but random target.

That all happened after the short tumultuous time between Bruno's fainting and the end of the school day. He was rushed into the nurse's office by the three schoolmates he was stuck with, Alex, Aster and Blossom.

Finally, Bruno opened his eyes to find the flat white painted walls, decorated with elegant paintings of new and old. Right beside those, there were bags full of papers, possibly records of something. Pictures of a mysterious man who was never seen at school was there, and it couldn't have been any nobleman. Probably just someone who the nurses know, whom were by his left-hand side of the bed he was on.

They stooped over him with their glimmering irises.

"Rise and shine," one greeted.

"It's morning…?" Bruno rasped.

They shook their heads together. There were two blonde and brunette ladies, rocking a bun and ponytail respectively with their pale cloudy nurse's outfits. "You've been well-rested—"

"For the better of half an hour," the other retorted.

Bruno blinked, his looks fixed upon their sugary faces. "Wait, where are Bruce and Jackie?" he asked as his top half got up from laying flat on the mattress and pillow, the blanket reacting by flopping downwards.

"They're safe, don't worry," the brunette assured.

"You must be one of the students searching for them. Well, your friends are ok if you're about to ask," the blonde lady added.

Bruno sighed in relief. The stones on his shoulders finally lifted.

At the creak of the door, Bruno spun his head to the left to find Alex, Aster and Blossom entering. No knocking was even there, they simply dashed in. The nurses didn't seem to mind either, still wearing their well-mannered expressions and holding their hands to their hips.

"Bruno!" Alex screamed.

He was the first to run to Bruno, resting his hand on the bed's iron fence. "Are you ok?" The frantic tone of his voice gave a lot of comforting clarity to the injured boy. He slightly nodded, the aftermath of his broken neck lingering on his innards.

Aster and Blossom approached him too, though farther than Alex. Clearly, the latter wanted to get closer with how much she nudged closer to him. "Thank god you're ok," the former snickered. "Yeah. Mando and Barley will be having a field day if you died!" A shove came from Blossom's shoulder, smacking Aster's who turned distraught and disillusioned afterwards. What a terrible joke he made!

Bruno gave the nurses a look for permission. His eyes shone greatly. The nurses replied with a nod then moved away, hiding behind the curtains between Bruno's bed and the one to his left. After, his glance pierced back to his peers. A question was flowing through his noggin.

"Guys, uhm…" He stopped himself, gulping. Regret might've come of this. "Do you think we're friends yet?"

The query stumped Alex, Aster and Blossom. They were all staring at the bed-ridden boy as if he was drunk and blabbering about what he did last night. With how sudden it was, that was electricity striking through their hearts.

After exchanging curious looks, they channeled their eyes to Bruno together. "No," they retorted like an acapella.

Bruno's heart changed into pure fragments. A shadow of its former self. His world flipped upside down. Admittedly, the entire time he was below the ground with them, he felt like he truly developed something with them. Not that he could name it, but it was certainly that of a friendship. Some relationship that relinquishes his loneliness. But no, the world can't be that easy, not even to any John Doe like him. While he was warming on the inside, on the outside, he pretended to shrug it

off with a stupid expression. Trying to seem as smug as he could to not seem like a clingy idiot that he believes himself to be. And one that, no doubt, Aster especially hopes him to be.

"Well, how is everyone else? What happened?" Bruno asked swiftly.

"Terrance got to prison as soon as he got out of the basement with… Right! The sparring teachers are also back, safe and sound. They're actually outside because they're waiting for their wounds to heal. Can't exactly do much," Alex explained.

Bruno didn't even realize how the kids in front of him also got hurt. "How about you guys?"

"We just got some bandaids when we took you here," Aster answered with a bit of swagger, showing off his elbow with a small bandage. Blossom giggled sweetly. That made Bruno's mouth gape a bit.

"How about the class?" Bruno followed his questions, evidently about Class 2 who, last time he saw them, were just left alone wondering about what'll happen next in the investigation of their teacher. Their leader and vice leader just left for hours, seemingly enough.

"They're fine. I can't deny, they were visibly worried about us," smiled Alex.

After a while of catching up, Bruno could finally stand up after asking the nurses if he could.

"And don't get yourself into any sort of silly danger like this next time," the blonde nurse joked.

The brunette chortled. "Well, he was saving a teacher!"

"True," the other nurse interjected.

Bruno chuckled. Soon, he started to follow Alex, Aster and Blossom out of the gate. As expected, he finally could fully see the teachers he was trying to find for the entire day. They were appearing as powerful as he had thought.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the great Bruno," one of the teachers smiled.

The boy's face lit up. His peers were grouped up farther away. They had already seen the teachers well enough, so it was Bruno's time to interact with them. "Mr. Bruce, Mr. Jackie!"

"Or Mr. Lane if you want call us both formally," the man replied.

"I'm Bruce. Jack, or Jackie, is my brother here," he introduced formally, pointing to the wider man as his brother.

“My classmates have been talking great about you guys!” Bruno joyously said. “But, uh, what even happened?”

Bruce sighed, his brother leaning closer to his knee. “Your classmate, Connor, witnesses us, right? Along with those Class 3 girls? Yes, what they said was true. We were speaking to a man in a cloak in the morning. We threatened to beat him up since he wasn’t a staff member, not belonging in the school at all.”

Jackie coughed. “Then he revealed himself to be Terrance. We wanted to warn everyone but—”

“But then he knocked us out with his bare hands… He is tough.”

After Bruce continued what his brother said, Bruno’s concern grew until it finally sprouted a question. “Why did he kidnap you anyways?”

Bruce and Jackie seemed to have started where they ended, but actually, they were answering his question. “He locked us up in this strange closet. That’s where we stayed for the rest of the school day, and that’s close to where you and your friends ended up in. We managed to use our strength to get out. But while we were kidnapped, he…”

Bruce choked during his recounting of events. It was noticeably traumatizing. His palms covered his mouth. Jackie did him a favor and continued. “He tried to persuade us into being Darkeners. This is far from the first time in our lives. You see, Terrance used to study with us in university, and the two of us tend to have chats with him whenever his buddy, Andrew Lopez, wasn’t around.”

“He believes that, with our immense strength, we could be good assets to Utter Darkness. But alas to him, we never believed the same things he did. He’s a fool… I don’t know how he ever got into that prestigious university. Andrew was so much cleverer,” Bruce finally finished.

Bruno’s mouth opened wide. It finally made sense, especially in his head when he could puzzle some pieces together. Terrance was eager to recruit some individuals, and came to the school to finish an assignment from Utter Darkness… To beat down or kidnap Bruno and company. That story had one name that struck him, however.

“Andrew Lopez… Max’s father,” Bruno breathed.

“Yes, yes. He is indeed Max’s father—or creator. You do know he isn’t human, right?” Jackie asked.

Bruno nodded in response. Perhaps Andy *was* cleverer than Terrance if he could literally build a whole robot boy who Bruno himself had mistaken for a real one.

"Well, I'm just glad you're ok. Hope I get to have an actual lesson from you two!" Bruno joked.

Bruce and Jackie grinned, but didn't laugh due to feeling like they've relived their trauma. "Of course," they said together.

Bruno, along with Alex, returns to Class 2 by crossing the many stairs that lead to Floor 3, followed by the tired Aster and Blossom, who were just treading their way through, then off to Class 4 and 3 respectively.

The road to the class felt like the road to home. It was purely comforting finding his way back to the old place he once knew. A day really felt like a whole year had passed at this point, but it was the theme of the day.

Once they opened the door to find the entire class formerly paying attention to the teacher, Garcia, snapping to see their leaders like a veteran soldier returning from war to find their children.

"Bruno! Alex" they all called out.

But Garcia was the one most jolly to see them. "Oh, kids! You're ok!" She might've even been on the brink of tears.

"Hello! We lived!" Bruno snickered.

Nadia cried out loud while the others were harmonizing in their jubilation. Suddenly, everyone had an urge to run to them, though it probably wasn't the time. When they were returning to their thrones that are their seats, they had a strong feeling that they were home, even if it was just their classroom. Garcia was like a mother while their classmates were their siblings. It was a warm moment that Bruno knew he would never get back to.

For once, the day was normal and pulled everyone's heartstrings. The case was solved and no harm was done, other than maybe Bruno's mental health.

And at that moment, they all forgot… That they have an English class to follow!

Chapter 16
Back Home

The end of the school day rises as the alarm bells harmonized in the air of vibrating voices. Walls flushed with sounds of talking children, mixed with the dashing footsteps of them. Everyone seemed to have lined up a few minutes before the end of the day, since the teens all dashed outside in unison—not even forming a path. This did cause chaos, but at the same time, Munz kept things in check, for he is the floor monitor.

Bruno and Alex were the last two left in class. At this point, Bruno expects that it'd happen a lot more often on other days. Nonetheless, he saw Garcia walk past the two.

"Not going home?" Garcia asked, turning her head back to talk to the students.

"Oh, we are. We're just absorbing the… atmosphere," Alex said, pausing in between, possibly searching for a good word to use.

"Where are *you* going?" asked Bruno after, slightly pointing at Garcia. "Going to see my daughter! And my husband… And my son!" answered Garcia. Bruno realizes how many relatives Garcia has in this school, although it is much less than the others. At the moment, it felt like Garcia basically had her entire family tree attend the school, however!

Without saying any 'goodbyes', Garcia led a comforting smile and walked out of school. The door almost slapped Alex, who was closer to it than Bruno was.

"Sure was the first day of school!" Bruno chuckled by joking. Alex smirked. "You could say that again," he replied. "Well, don't you have a father to go to?" Bruno asked, scratching his hair. There was a minute of silence emitting from Alex, before he answered with, "Yeah, but he takes a while to get out… I'll go now."

Bruno follows Alex out of the classroom door.

The two pass through the halls, then down the stairs. During that time, Bruno could examine the walls of the school. There were countless pictures and drawings from the junior students, while certificates from seniors such as him. Alex was the bearer of one of those certificates. Impressed, Bruno wanted to speak out about it to Alex, but decided to keep his mouth shut. A big mouth shouldn't be opened, he assumed.

Then they finally pass through the stampeding students on the first floor. Those stampeding students being the first and second graders who once tried to attack them and their classmates—now passive and only hungry to get back home. Bruno smiled to himself because of that. He had got lost in his thoughts about what happened earlier that day revolving those students, and how his brother saved him and his classmates.

Finally, they passed and reached a massive hall. That hall is the "multi-purpose" hall of the school. It is used for assemblies and events, but also for those going back home.

"Bruno, aren't you going to your bus?" Alex suddenly asked, interrupting Bruno viewing the stunning, special hall. "The bus? Isn't there a way to go to them here?" he asked, having a face of slight anger and confusion. "No! This is for those who are going to be picked up by their guardian!" Alex yelled back. Bruno gasped.

Bruno frantically examined the door where he entered from. His breath was a gripe away from being gone before he saw a pink floral-dressed girl. Indeed, it was Blossom! The girl who he was with for the dangerous parts of the day, and the beginning!

"Bye Alex! Got to go!" Bruno said in a rush. He dashed to Blossom, almost crashing into her. Alex was left dumbfounded. Bruno could only hear a slight 'Alex!' from behind him. When he twisted his head back, he found Duke Wilson, Alex's father, towering over him, raring to go to their pearl white car.

Bruno continued following Blossom as soon as he used the brakes on his feet. Evidently, the fact that he was following someone wasn't acknowledged. Might've not even been noticed by Blossom.

Eventually, Bruno started to pant so hard, it sounded like he just finished running. It was so loud, Blossom turned her head instantly to the back, just to see her ordinary, blue-clothed friend standing behind her.

"Oh, Bruno!" Blossom exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"The bus… The bus!" Bruno repeated while panting. It confused Blossom, as expected. No context was given as to what even happened to Bruno.

Before the boy could continue what he was saying, he was cut off by nearly tripping on a book. A step almost made him fall. "Woah!" shrieked Bruno. He stared down to see the book.

It was brown, dusty. *Very* dusty. It was dusty enough that nobody could see the title. Bruno picks it up, almost cautiously. There was a sense that something was off about the book too. As if it was from another world, rather than their own. It even seemed like the book was cursed.

After some examining between the two, Bruno blew the dust and opened the book, scouring its pages. "Nothing," Bruno stated. "*Nothing!*" he repeated with bit more shock. "*How?!*" Blossom asked, nearly exclaiming. "I mean, *yes*… It looks old, but then again, who would leave an old book in the middle of some school's field?" Blossom added. Bruno shrugged, twisting his head left to right after. "*I don't know,*" he replied with defeat. Bruno stared at the book more. Clearly, there was something more to this book than it looks. Why else would he stumble into this book? "Bruno?" Blossom asked. He heard her as echoes of a far distance, however.

"It's nothing," Bruno hissed, sliding the now-cleaned book to his bag.

"Do you think it's safe to keep it?" Blossom asked.

"Of course. Yeah, it could belong to someone, or it doesn't. At least I can use it. I mean, it's blank!" answered Bruno. He assured Blossom with a last shoulder pat, though she kept her silence. "Come on. Let's just go home."

Blossom didn't look like she moved on though. Such a topic is still on her mind. Nobody could blame her. Seeing someone pick up a dusty old book while in a paranormal domain didn't sit right with her. "Bruno! It could be haunted… Or even worse… Cursed! The signs are all written right there!" shrieked Blossom. Bruno was beginning to walk in front of her when she said that, so the sweet voice of Blossom was behind him, almost sounding like a mere echo in the open air. "You're kind of crazy for thinking it's cursed… Also for thinking there's something written on it," Bruno shrugged. Only the back of his head could be seen to Blossom.

A sudden honk danced to Bruno's ears. His mind, once occupied with the book, now turned its attention to the direction of the honk, his head obeying its thoughts and twisted to the right at the same time.

A slight 'huh?' could be heard out of Bruno.

There, in front of him, was a black car. It was an SUV, though an average one at that. Looked like it could hold 5 people. The car seemed awfully familiar to Bruno, but he quickly assumed that it's just someone who has a similar car.

Although, at first, he thought the honk wasn't for him, which caused him to look away from it. It only took a mere second from his head turning for it to honk

again though. Bruno turned again and found a familiar face—his father—sitting in the front seat of the car. “Who is that?” Blossom asked, amidst the silence that occurred (other than the honks). “My… dad?” responded Bruno, with a flair of confusion.

Then, a car’s window sliding down could be heard, even from the distance. A head stuck out from it. It really was Bruno’s father.

“Dad! Wha—What are you doing here?” Bruno stuttered in the middle of asking. He rushed impulsively to him as well.

“I was let off work early, so I decided to pick you up!” Ryan answered. Bruno was watching his father speak while latching on to where the window was once. Blossom slowly followed Bruno too, though Ryan could only pick up her pink and black kimono before he signaled Bruno to the car. He did so by tilting his head to the back. “Come on, boy. We don’t want to be late for dinner!” he chuckled.

Bruno smiled wide. He was glad he didn’t have to deal with Nathaniel again! Although he does have to deal with him for the rest of the year, he’s just glad that the first day wasn’t infested with him during the bus rides. Without saying a word, Bruno dashed to the passenger door. During that time, Bruno could only catch a glimpse of Blossom walking to the bus door. It seemed that it’s time for it to go. He didn’t mind—his father had already come to him! He couldn’t deny that he could see a slight pout on Blossom’s face, however.

Bruno hopped through the car door. The air breezed through his short brown hair, thrusting through his chest. He could barely make it before an emerald green leaf propelled to the interior of the car. Bruno panted harshly because of all the fresh air entering his anxious lungs. It was crippled by his overwhelming joy of being with his father rather than a group of bustling bus kids as well.

In the pocket of the car door panel was a strawberry flavored lollipop. Bruno could tell by the red wrapping of the spherical part of it. Of course, he was overjoyed—much more than before. Perhaps even on top of the world.

“Dad, is that lollipop for me!?” Bruno squealed in excitement.

One of Bruno’s favorite treats is lollipops. He loves to suck on them during car rides and even during school. Lollipops don’t require any hands to be eaten after all.

"Yes! I got it for free from the department. Well, I kind of stole it, but everyone there was fine with it anyways," said Ryan. A jolly yet humbled chuckle could be heard shortly after.

Bruno snatched it while his father spoke, loosening the wrapping quicker than anyone his age could—or simply anyone for that matter. Only a split second passed when Bruno flung the lollipop into his mouth. He later grappled his hands onto the back of Ryan's seat, which was the driver's seat.

"What happened at the department anyways? You said you were excused to leave early today. That doesn't usually happen!" Bruno asked. The sucking of his lollipop could be audible to Ryan's ears. However, Bruno's voice could still be heard, but with some mumbles and a muffled voice thrown in.

"Oh, a case I and my team were supposed to solve was apparently solved…" Ryan explained awkwardly. "What do you mean?" Bruno asked swiftly. "A case I was supposed to solve was solved by someone else—before me and my team," repeated Ryan, mixed with new words and different sentence structures. He said it speedily, as if he wanted to avoid talking about it.

Bruno thought about it, which caused a few minutes of silence to transpire. All he thought about was what happened at school. Specifically, about the disappearance of Bruce and Jackie, as well as Terrance's madness. He also wondered if Terrance would return, like he said he would. *What even was his* true *intention with him?* At that moment, he thought about the fact that maybe the police and private investigators (like his father) were going to commit to solving the case.

Ryan strangely didn't notice the silence that much, although he could very well be enjoying it. Hearing the sucking of his son's lollipop was already enough. While his face was out of view, Bruno could tell that Ryan stared into the ominous distance from the car window, and through the reflection, he could tell that Ryan's eyes were focused to what's in front of him.

"Did it have to do with my school?" Bruno suddenly asked.

"Your school? No! It didn't have anything to do with you. It's just a murder case, albeit one next to your school," answered Ryan, with a hefty voice in the start.

"Next to my school?" his son followed, with heaps of memories leaping back to him about what his classmates and—most importantly—schoolmates told him about Terrance. Regardless, Bruno kept his silence straight, letting Ryan continue speaking. "Oh yes. The picture I saw was insane, alright! He was a man with short

dark brown hair. He had one of the shabbiest clothes I've ever seen—and I've worked solving and stopping many shabby criminals!" Ryan detailed.

Bruno jumped at the moment his father said '*short dark brown* hair'. More questions started flowing to Bruno, like water down a stream of a formerly blocked river.

"His name is Andy Lopez. I've been told that he murdered a group of five college kids who went to a local skateboarding park. It was surely an interesting first case—but an unsuccessful one considering the fact that it was already solved when I'm done!" he added once more. Bruno remembered something strange about his name. Andy *Lopez*? The surname did ring a bell for Bruno. Sadly, he couldn't itch the sense of familiarity.

Then it hit him…

"Lopez? Isn't that the last name of Maximillian…? His creator?" Bruno pondered to himself, accidentally saying it out loud for his father to hear. He even remembered how Bruce and Jackie knew him… "What?" his father instantly called out. Bruno could luckily be barely heard, thanks to his lollipop muffling his voice.

Ryan chuckled, much more uncomfortable than earlier. Bruno expected something else to happen. Something to subvert the question.

"What about you? Something happened?" Ryan asked.

Bruno sprung to the back seats, somehow the lollipop didn't fall off. His face turned from a face of curiosity to a face of fear, then to a fake comforting expression.

"Oh! Lots!" Bruno nodded while answering. He even led out a good chuckle.

Bruno went on to describe what happened during the day not long after. Describing the grueling details of the murderer he was up against, the mischief he went through along the way with his classmates, and the making of some new friends (sort of). "… I think only one really wanted to befriend me though," Bruno said during the explanation.

At first, Ryan paid attention to Bruno. It only washed way after a couple of minutes. Soon, everything Bruno was saying turned into scrambled white noise. Really, the only parts Ryan was paying attention to were the mentions of Terrance. That *truly* piqued his interest. Never did he have any reports of a murderer at school during his detective career, nor do any police officers outside of Manhattan for that matter. It's safe to say that he will be busy where he is now.

"… It was insane!" Bruno finished, laughing at the mere end.

"You could say that twice," his father added, though his voice sounded much more monotonous than Bruno. His eye was even glaring at every crack of the foreboding road in front of him.

"But… seriously. How could any of this happen on your first day?" Ryan suddenly asked with a grim and straightened tone. Bruno could feel his father shudder as he said that. "It's like having a murder mystery in my hands the first day of work!" Ryan added.

Bruno thought about it thoroughly. *This isn't normal, isn't it?* Of course it isn't. "I don't know," Bruno answered, with a much darker voice than before. Thoughts sunk into him, including second thoughts about the school. He wouldn't be surprised if his father was feeling the same. Maybe even before Bruno and his family even drove through Brooklyn Bridge! "Well, I guess this is what happens when moving into a city with a high crime rate!" Ryan chuckled, despite the dark tone and subject of his sentence. Bruno noticed that. Rather than laughing, his frown grew deeper. His fast as a heartbeat blinking got louder somehow. His lollipop even fell off, yet he didn't pick it up.

Ryan sighed as he stopped at a traffic light that flashed red. Not only was he seemingly upset about being stopped though, but also about the topic being silently talked about.

"Let's get some ice cream. I think we deserve it after what happened to each of us today, eh?" Ryan energetically asked Bruno. Bruno nodded quickly, with no thoughts on his mind beforehand. "What about rocky road? Mint chocolate chip?" his father considered as he thought of every ice cream flavor. Bruno rolled his eyes while grappling on the back on the driver's seat, almost having the ability to feel his father's scruffy hair.

"How about vanilla, as usual?" Bruno proposed, laughing a bit.

Ryan chuckled alongside him. "Of course! Always vanilla! Why not chocolate? Strawberry? Or mint chocolate chip?" he asked. Bruno didn't say anything. He'd rather shrug. He soon slid down at his father's hand, though he was thinking at the same time. Thinking so much that what he was looking at didn't matter.

"What I'm *really* thinking about is the rest of the school year, actually," Bruno said, not long after. Bruno tilted his head to the right to look at his father while saying

so. “Well, if the first day is this… insane. Then I bet the rest of the school year will equally be… insane!” Ryan answered, sounding uncertain in some parts.

Bruno’s smile extended across his face as he pushed himself back to his seat. He flung so hard, that his hat flopped to the seat and his backpack jumped. A sigh was led out. It was loud enough that it covered the sounds of the car revving. Ryan didn’t say anything. Neither did Bruno. The former was only focused on the road.

Not long after Bruno landed on his seat, Bruno noticed a familiar object that flung out of his backpack when hopping back. It was the dusty old book that Bruno picked up earlier. What seemed strange to him at first was how the book wasn’t even zipped. He swore to himself that he did.

Nonetheless, Bruno didn’t really finish his conversation about it with Blossom either. All because of his father driving his way in.

Bruno really considered what Blossom said. He remembered what the conversation entailed.

“Do you think it’s safe to keep it?”

“Of course. Yeah, it could belong to someone, or it doesn’t. At least I can use it. I mean, it’s blank!”

“Bruno! It could be haunted… Or even worse… Cursed! The signs are all written right there!”

“You’re kind of crazy for thinking it’s cursed…”

Then and there did Bruno realized that, perhaps the book did mean something. It could belong to someone, and he could return it, yet he felt the same way he did earlier. Some sort of natural belonging to it. As if it was destined to find it.

Bruno thought it was crazy, him thinking about these things. “Destiny isn’t real,” he always thought. “It’s just our future being shaped from our actions, and at least destiny isn’t for me.”

He finally took the book, snatching it once again like he did at the school grounds. With a closer look away from the shining and blinding sun, and a better way for the dust to clear thanks to air conditioners, Bruno could clearly see the book.

It was a dark brown leather book. It did look antique. It had a curled bracket design etched as border designs for the book. Despite the look of it having a title, it didn’t, as Bruno suspected when he first picked it up. There definitely was no present writing either. It was completely blank, with the exception of guide lines for writing.

This book was certainly no ordinary book any student would have in his school. While his schoolmates were certainly an extraordinary bunch, he never saw any as having a book such as this sophisticated leather one. Neither were his teachers, other than Wayne. The potential price of the book wasn't doing any of Bruno's elimination thinking any favors either.

Meeting at a dead end, Bruno decides to just own the book and take it to school. His plan was that, if he took the book out openly, then he'd see if anyone recognized it and ask him about it.

Since he believes that things won't go that way, however…

He decides to do something else just to indicate that the book is alive in some way.

Bruno leans on to the door of the right passenger seat, finding a way to hide his book from his father while having the ability to write on it. He could only write on the wall, yet he felt it was enough.

Bruno finally positioned himself and his pen to the paper. Aiming like an archer's arrow. He began to jot down a name. After many ideas that he kept scratching over and over again, he ended up with just a working title: The Haunted House.

Prideful of himself, he continued writing while he kept thinking about the wild day he just went through. Keeping in mind that it was only his first day… *What will the rest of the year be like?*

THE CLASSES!

The tenth-grade batch is split into four classes, uncreatively named: Class 1, 2, 3 and 4. Despite their names, they are all different and fascinating in their own ways.

Class 2

LEADER: Alex Wilson
VICE LEADER: Bruno Ray
MEMBERS: 20
ASSOCIATIONS: Mystery-solving, the supernatural, and formerly being the "mean" ones

This is the class where our mystery-solving heroes study in. Unlike other classes, there are no associated personality traits or commonalities with the students, other than maybe being curiously different than the other classes. Since Alex, its current leader, joined Team Toxic (for a short time), it's been rumored that the class is cursed by no-one other than Utter Darkness, a devil longing for revenge against mother.

Class 1

LEADER: Ryder Tumble
VICE LEADER: Robin Zealous
MEMBERS: 21
ASSOCIATIONS: Rich, famous, high in power, quite entitled individuals

If you've ever shared tongues with a Class 1 member, then you know you're under some strong influence! Class 1 is a class for "highbrow" students, which is why its nickname is "first class." Not only is it a pun on how they're numerically the first class of all, but being in the classroom would make you feel like you're in the first-class section of a plane!

Class 3

LEADER: Peppermint Puddle
VICE LEADER: Ellie Paris
MEMBERS: 21
ASSOCIATIONS: Fair, sweet, optimistic, and frankly annoying

Class 3 is the most reliable class to go to when it comes to being treated with kindness! They (obviously) know a thing or two about that. To some students' hearts, it does seem like they are faking it, especially with Dexter, a student who nobody trusts—not even his classmates! Despite these associations, they have a bitter rivalry with Class 4.

Class 4

LEADER: Michael Walls
VICE LEADER: Brody Naomi
MEMBERS: 22
ASSOCIATIONS: Justice-driven, tough, intelligent, means business yet realistic

Out of all the classes, they are the strongest. You can bet they ace on every athletic-related subject! All their strength doesn't go to waste either. The class has a fair look on justice and serves it whenever it is needed. Neither does the phrase "brains over brawns" mean anything to them as they are the brains themselves! Its former leader, Hannah, is also the founder of the class system. They have a bitter rivalry with Class 3 for their opposing ideals.

You can catch up on these class's stories in future Extraordinary books!

Special Thanks to…

Those three girls who inspired me to write the books in grade 8. While they didn't know it, and still don't I assume, the minutes I spent with them gave me the idea of the story of Extraordinary that we have today.

I unfortunately cannot say their names due to privacy reasons, but they probably know who they are so thank you, even if you don't know.

Bruno finally faced the window. Stars resembled faces to him. Faces smiling back. Wishing himself goodnight. He has only felt this way once. That one time he has; it was strangely when he first got to school. Perhaps he only experiences this only when he's anxious for a first day of school in a new one, but not truly.

A young boy named Bruno attempts to navigate through high school while solving mysteries revolving around his school—and perhaps all of New York City. On his way, he finds out a dark secret about himself.

In this book, Bruno experiences his first day of school, but it isn't like any other! In his new school, which is a branch of his former one, he meets all his classmates and possible friends. On his way through the day, however, he encounters his first mystery that must be solved. That mystery?

What happened to two of his teachers?

Written by: Jasmine